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AUGUST

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THE **RIDER FROM HELL**

GRIPPING OUTLAW NOVEL

by **ROBERT ORMOND CASE**

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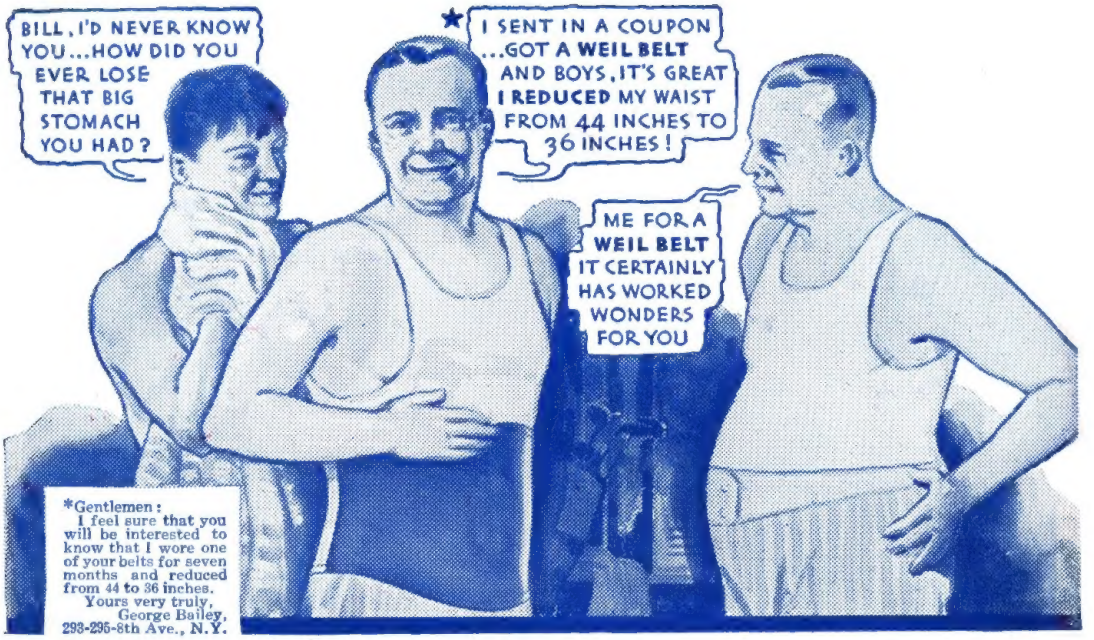
ROBERT E. MAHAFFAY

A POPULAR PUBLICATION

AUGUST STAR WESTERN MAGAZINE 15¢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THE BIG 160 PAGE MAGAZINE

VOLUME THREE | AUGUST, 1934 | NUMBER THREE

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They had heard, those Mexicans, of Gringo honor—but would that young Señor Givens be fool enough to return with his good American dollars for the release of his friend, John Thurston, and risk dying with him of dry rot in that great new federal prison of Carrizal?

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LONGRIDER RECKONING.....By Walt Coburn 70

Long Bob, they said, was riding the Owlhoot trails again—a dead man come back to square accounts with the outlaw who had once been his best friend. . . .

THE TRAIL OF DOOMED MEN.....By Ray Nafziger 96

Death beckoned those law-ridden renegades when they determined to go out in a shower of powder-smoke and sparks. But an oath given to a dying man gave them something for which to live—and fight!

BRIMSTONE HERITAGE.....By Wallace K. Norman 116

Bonita needed a new marshal to fill the place of the man who had just been planted in Boothill. What more natural than it should choose a renegade gunman who left there as a boy?

GUNMAN'S HUNTING GROUND.....By Cliff Farrel 136

Smiler Britt, the greatest gunman in Cascade Valley, turned down fighting pay to champion the short-odds end of the ugliest war in range history!

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THE WRATH OF DEACON BOTTLE.....By Robert E. Mahaffay 58

Only one man had ever framed the Deacon—and that man was to die swiftly—by his own cunning!

BREED OF THE BORDER.....By Evan Leigh 86

A loyal breed of man, that little Mex—willing to shed his blood in the thankless service of the man he loved.

★★ Other Star Features ★★

HANGMAN'S HERITAGE.....The Maverick 8

The Hurricane Kid rode back with killer's guns. . . .

UP THE TRAIL.....A Department 55

Cover Painting by William F. Saare

Story Illustrations by Don Hewett, George H. Wert and Leslie Ross

Published every month by Popular Publications, Inc., 2256 Grove Street, Chicago, Illinois. Editorial and executive offices, 205 East Forty-second Street, New York City. Harry Steeger, President and Secretary, Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice President and Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter September 5, 1933, at the Post Office at Chicago, Ill., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Title registration pending at U. S. Patent Office. Copyright 1934 by Popular Publications, Inc. Single copy price 15c. Yearly subscriptions in U. S. A. $1.80. For advertising rates address Sam J. Perry, 205 E. 42nd St., New York, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts, kindly enclose stamped self-addressed envelope for their return if found unavailable. The publishers cannot accept responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts, although all care will be exercised in handling them.

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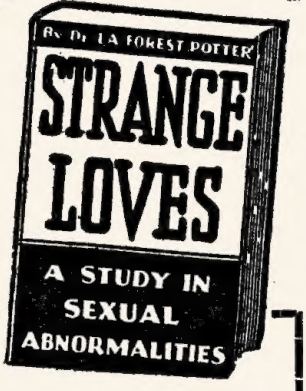

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30x5.25-20		2.95	1.15
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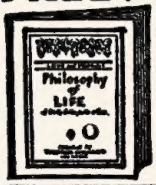

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Hangman's Heritage

OLD BUCK APPERSON, owner of the 88 brand in Hurricane Valley, grunted, shifted his gun around a little closer to his gnarled right hand. His high-heeled boot dug a little deeper in the dirt floor of Arkansaw Givney's tool shed, disclosing a green cow-hide. On the skin side, very clearly, he saw his own brand.

It was characteristic of the leather-faced old rancher to have said nothing about his visit to the Givney ranch-house that early morning. No use running a man down with suspicions, stirring up a lot of talk, unless you were sure. And now he was plenty sure!

Shortly after sunset the gangling Arkansaw Givney slouched into the cabin with his kid, Ott. He looked as if he were hung together by the same baling wire that he used to mend his little ranch-house. His dank graying hair fell over his eyes as he swore. "Looks like somebody's been nosing' around hyear, Ott. What yuh reckon—?" He turned out to the tool shed, his face strangely sallow beneath the stubble of whiskers. Ott, his gray eyes frowning, turned after him. At his heels came the flop-eared houn'-dawg, Ribs. Well, it looked all right out there, but a man could never tell. There was somethin' in the wind . . . . and Arkansaw Givney, worthless, shiftless squatter, sat hunched on the edge of his unmade cot, his .45-70 over his knees. He waited there in the dark, and crouching near him, big-eyed, troubled, was his kid.

There was only the soothing hush of the night wind; the call of a whip-poor-will, the soft regular thump-thump of the houn'-dawg's tail.

"Shet up that damn' cur," whispered Arkansaw.

The kid leaned over, patted the dog's soft head. He felt funny—strangely prickly down his spine; a bitterness in his throat. He said, "Ralph Apperson stuck up for me yesterday, Paw, when the men were kickin' me around . . . they swore we was stealin' cows . . ."

"Hell with 'em all!" the man snarled. "Plenty folks with long noses get 'em bit off." He shifted uneasily on the bunk-edge, his hand caressing the smooth sheen of the rifle barrel.

The kid sighed. "Gosh—if we could only stay here a spell! It's good land—yuh could start a right nice spread here. The neighbors is good folks, too. This is more of a home than we ever had. . . ."

The flat of the man's hand knocked the kid's head backward. He sobbed a couple of times, muffled, spasmodic sounds of bitterness and grief.

Outside, men were riding into the yard, dismounting. There came a shout. "Givney, come out with yore hands high. We want yuh!"

"Come an' git me!" yelled Arkansaw Givney, and shot twice through the thin door. A man gurgled an oath, slumped to the ground. Givney flattened himself near a window, drew the kid down with him. Shots whistled through the window, tore through the thin sides of the building. The kid, Ott Givney, his grief for the moment forgotten, helped his father, loaded the guns, fired the old .44 himself at a moving shadow stalking close. For two hours the battle continued. And then, Arkansaw Givney, wounded, half-delirious with pain, pushed out a soiled white rag on a stick.

They made short work of Arkansaw. A rope was thrown over a nearby cottonwood limb. Arkansaw's heels danced emptily on air with curses still on his lips. The kid shuddered once, his cold, sweat-damp palm still clamped on the gun-butt, and started to worm his way very stealthily from the shack.

A man's voice hallooed his discovery. But the man misjudged the distance and felt the cold muzzle of young Ott Givney's gun against his belly.

"I'm ridin'," the kid sobbed. "An' I'll live to see every man in the Hurricane burn in hell!"

He was gone, and the blackness swallowed his final hoofbeats.

Two—five years passed. The tumble-down ranch-house became a line-camp for the 88. The kid, it seemed, had dropped from sight until word came that a gunie calling himself the Hurricane Kid was gathering himself a reputation for the most ruthless Colt-man in that part of the Southwest. Sometimes he rode with the law; sometimes—according to whispers—he rode against it. And his trail was strewn with the bodies of those who had taken up his gun-boast—and lost.

Perilous times in the Hurricane valley now. Red war clouds hovered over its once peaceable grazing land and comfortable spreads. By might of guns and crooked lawyers, Big Franzen was working his way into the valley holdings, wiping out those small ranchers who stood in his path.

Young Ralph Apperson, heading the 88 spread, gathered about him the Hurricane men for a final stand-off. Big Franzen's riders were going to swoop into the town of Hurricane, stuff the ballot-boxes, grab hold of the county officers. And Big Franzen's gunies would make sure with six-gun and rifle that that election would be a land-slide. Apperson's men knew what small chance they'd have against the powerful greedy invader.

The morning dawned, with a red sun foretelling a bloody day. The valley men were crowded into town, grim-faced, their hats a-slant, their guns ready. A rider sloped down from the hills to tell of a cavalcade he had sighted—fifty or more fighters hitting hell for leather, heading for town.

You could hear the jingle of harness, it was so still, above the steady thudding of hooves, as the fighters of Big Franzen swept into town. Not a Valley man showed himself as the men stiffly dismounted before the court-house. For a moment they were gathered together about a gaunt-faced young-ster with tied-down holsters sagging on his thighs. In quiet tones he gave the orders. Riflemen above the bank squinted along their gun-muzzles. And then a strange thing happened.

A houn'-dawg, sunning itself in the street lazily sauntered over to the young gunman. The Hurricane Kid looked down at it a moment, and to this day men swear that something seemed to soften in his grim, bitter face as his hand reached down to pet the dog. The leader turned to the gun-hirelings and began to talk, but his voice was so low that no one heard what he said. It was an argument—a hot one, too. Suddenly, through that ten-sion, came the crack of a gun. The Hurricane Kid was fighting his own men!

No one yet knows who set that spark to the powder magazine that was Hurricane on that day. Guns ripped through the silence. Two of Franzen's men fell squirming in their death agony. The hidden marksmen were getting in their deadly work. But Franzen's killers knew how to combat that. Under cover of the fighting, a group of them worked their way around to take the Valley men from the rear. Young Apperson fell with a slug through his chest. Others, too, gunned their last in that red maelstrom.

Three were holding out, forted up on the roof of the jail. The killers held off for a moment, then a go-devil of flaming brushwood was started for the building from the nearby hillside. It had almost reached the wooden jailhouse when one man, powder-blackened, blood-soaked, streaked from the jailhouse. He flung himself straight into the path of that flaming go-devil. He struggled with it one tense moment, managed to turn it. And he lay there, his guns spewing lead at the last of the Franzen gunies.

Startled oaths of amazement came from the few remaining Valley de-fenders. "Th' Hurricane Kid—Givney's kid!"

The Kid smiled tiredly. "Yeah—I come back to see that you all burn in hell, like I said I would. But a man can't do that to his own home folks . . ."

The tail of Ribs, the old houn'-dawg, thumped the dirt near Ott Givney's blood-stained boots.

—THE MAVERICK.

By Robert Ormond Case

THE RIDER

They had heard, those Mexicans, of Gringo honor—and one at least, was willing to gamble that young Dal Givens would return with the many good American dollars for the release of his friend, John Thurston—who otherwise would die of dry rot and torture in the great new Federal prison of Carrizal!

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THE RIDER FROM HELL

Gripping Complete Outlaw Novel

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eyes roving toward an adjoining small table arrayed with bottles and goblets, promising present relief from the routine of the proceedings. A white-clad *mozo* standing there, and two peons loitering across the street were the sole civilian spectators.

At the end of the table, flanked by a squad of soldiers with fixed bayonets, the two manacled prisoners sat. The assembled officers examined them lazily from time to time, yawning and twirling the ends of their mustachios.

One, the Señor Thurston, was a man of middle age, with crag-like features and a ragged mustache that curved down to meet a fighting jaw. The other, the Señor Dal Givens, was young, of lean Texan build. Both sat sprawled and comfortable, their worn, high-heeled boots thrust far beneath the table, their gaze lifted high above the palms and white-walled buildings toward the far, shimmering horizon.

They were incomprehensible, this gringo breed, even after two generations of Border conflict. Here and now their fate was being decided. It was already decided, their guilt being plain. Yet they were calm, apparently unmoved, as though they sat among friends playing their national game of cards, the game called poker.

The case against them was self-evident. The infamous Zorillo, rebel chieftain, was being supplied with arms and ammunition, smuggled across the Border. Agents of the rebel chief would make these purchases across the Rio and engage lawless persons to make deliveries at a designated point in the province, under cover of night. The Señores Thurston and Givens had engaged to make such a delivery.

But in a hidden arroyo one day's journey south of the Border, a roving party of *bandidos* had set upon the *caballada,* or pack-train. The Señores Thurston and Givens had battled tremendously, but they had been overwhelmed by sheer numbers. The *caballada* had been scattered, the ammunition seized. Making their escape on foot, the Señores Thurston and Givens had been surrounded and made prisoners by the army of the Republic.

And how were these facts known? It was very simple, *Señor El Commandante!* With supreme military cunning—*muy perrito,* like a very dog, as the vaqueros say—the army of the Republic had watched the battle in the arroyo from the safety of the adjoining plain. When the issue had been decided the defenders of the Republic had leaped to the attack. True, the *bandidos* had made good their escape, together with many thousand rounds of ammunition. To counterbalance this regrettable but minor fact, two *Americanos* had been captured and brought before a stern but just tribunal. *Viva* Mexico, and death to enemies of the Republic!

Thus the case was presented and concluded. Did the Señores Thurston and Givens desire to make a statement before sentence was pronounced?

John Thurston spoke for both. He made his defense briefly, knowing that all words would be in vain. He and his partner, Givens, were not engaged in selling ammunition. They had been hired to make a delivery for Zorillo. They would have made the delivery just as readily, and for the same price in gold, for the army of the Republic. They knew nothing of the issues involved between the rival armies and cared less. Having failed in their mission, which they had undertaken merely as agents for one of the warring factions, they should not be treated as enemies of the Republic but as prisoners of war.

He made his plea simply, with grave

composure. But because John Thurston had lived long on the Border his faded eyes twinkled guardedly upon his partner. It was a glance that called upon the younger man to stand fast, to meet these theatrical but none-the-less deadly proceedings with a bold front.

Dal Givens did not laugh back. He glanced once at Thurston, then looked away. His face was expressionless as before. Through the great gate and beyond the drowsing town, his somber gaze was fixed upon the point where the sweltering plains joined the brazen sky. That way lay the Rio Grande, and Texas.

And now the vote was being taken. A polite pause had followed John Thurston's plea, presumably to allow mature consideration of it; but the thoughts of the officers were patently far away.

"Death," said the senior officer, a dashing young blade from Monterey, his black, moist eyes fixed hungrily upon the wine bottles.

"Death," said the next in line, caressing a silken mustache.

"Death," murmured the others, yawning.

THE white-jacketed attendant became more alert, bending over the wine. The guards stiffened to attention. Then all relaxed again, the officers shrugging apologetically. El Capitan Don Miguel y Fernando, Commandante of Presidio Carrizal, had risen to his feet. He was polished, suave, resplendently uniformed, his dark, aristocratic features of the pure Castilian stamp.

"Your pardon, señores," said he politely. "Not death, I beg of you. A prison term, perhaps, in Presidio Carrizal?"

The blade from Monterey shrugged his correctly tailored shoulders. The shrug passed down the line. After all, Don Miguel was a person of force and political power. His commission had come direct from Mexico City.

"At your service, El Commandante," said he of Monterey. "Ten years? Five years, perhaps?"

"One year, señores," said Don Miguel, his teeth flashing, "should be sufficient. It will repay their debt to the Republic."

All smiled in response. The commandante's genial intent was unmistakable. Since Presidio Carrizal had been established as a Federal prison by Porfirio Diaz, no American had survived a year of servitude within its grim walls. One, hardier than most, so legend affirmed, had lived seven months.

"It is well," said Monterey. "The wish of the Señor Don Miguel is our command. For the enemies of the Republic, the *Americanos* Thurston and Givens, one year in Presidio Carrizal."

"At hard labor," suggested Don Miguel. "Yes? It is for the record. One never knows."

The Americans rose to their feet and Don Miguel turned to the guard. "To the south wall, for the present, in the special cell. Later, for the comfort of our guests, we will make different arrangements."

And thus, hemmed in by fixed bayonets, the prisoners were escorted through an arched corridor that joined the plaza with an inner square. A gate swung inward to receive them and closed at their backs. The chests of the escorting guard swelled complacently. A shout of laughter came from the spectators as one of the squad, on the pretext that the Señor Givens was hanging back, prodded the tall Texan sharply with his rifle-butt.

Dal Givens' lips compressed into a thin, hard line. Except for the dark flush that rose over his bronzed features, he gave no outward hint of explosive passions held in check. Already he had gained an inkling of why Texans did not live long in El Presidio Carrizal.

They entered a narrow door that pierced the south wall of the hollow square. A winding stair led down into dark, foul depths. Rats scurried from underfoot in a dim corridor. The sound of their progress raised up hollow echoes as they were led to what Don Miguel had referred to as a special cell.

It was narrow and low-ceilinged, a mere cubicle built into the solid stone masonry. No windows opened from it. The sole passage of air was through the heavily grilled doorway into the stifling corridor. A stone bench flanked the rear of the cubicle. Ancient, moldy straw littered the floor. A battered bucket stood in the corner. And that was all.

As the grille clanged shut behind them and the guard marched away, John Thurston seated himself upon the bench, disposing his manacled hands behind him. Dal Givens leaned against the wall, bracing his feet. Even in this posture, so low was the ceiling, the top of his tawny head brushed the damp stone.

They eyed each other for a space, their features glistening. Each turned his head, brushing his jaw against his shoulder to wipe the perspiration away. A rat leaped forth from the straw at John Thurston's feet, plunged through the grille and was gone down the corridor. The silence that followed was not a true silence. It was interwoven with the sound of myriad unseen and nameless things that crawled and crept in the straw underfoot and moved with a tiny, rustling undertone over the rough-hewn rock.

"WELL, *caballero,*" said Dal, "it looks like we've made the turn. So this is the finish, eh?"

"Finish," agreed John Thurston.

Dal heaved himself away from the wall with a curse. Roaches scuttled and scampered underfoot. He stamped upon them in a frenzy, grinding them into the floor. When moldy dust rose about him, foul with odors of ancient filth and decay, he desisted and seated himself heavily beside Thurston. He could not bury his face in his hands. He drew up his knees and rested his forehead against them.

"I spent a week in a Mex jail once, over at Piedras Negras," Thurston spoke reminiscently. "They feed you twice a day. If the frijoles ain't moldy, they could crawl off on their own legs. If you talk back to the guards, or act like you still have hope, they begin with ten lashes. The first time it ain't so bad. The second time, before your back's healed, you know you've been somewhere. God! You should have seen my back after the second—"

"Shut up," said Dal, with a shudder. "Question is, where do we go from here?" He raised his head to peer at the older man. Darkness was thickening in corridor and cell. The whites of his eyes glistened. "Thurston," said he. "We've trailed together for three years now, since I joined the Wild Bunch up yonder. We've seen some mighty tough spots, and outlived 'em. I know you and you know me. We can talk turkey. What you're aiming to say—this is brass tacks, eh?"

"That's it," agreed the other, quietly. "Brass tacks. And this ain't a local jail at Piedras Negras, son. It's Carrizal, which is plenty worse. Ever hear what the natives call it? *Casa Diablos*—house of devils, and they cross themselves when they mention it, too. Get this, too, son, right at the beginning: we can't complain. It ain't up to us to work up a spite against these lads. We've simply got to look at it as a play on which we bet our lives. And lost."

"I knew that." Dal spoke slowly. "We've made the same bet before. But I didn't figure on this."

"Nor I," agreed John Thurston. "I figured, if there was a slip-up, that we'd make our getaway. Or pass out fighting."

"Instead, we die by inches?"
"By plenty tough inches."
And they were silent.

AT length Dal said, "We should have dragged down our winnings and called it a day. You said so, when we quit King Gillette and his crowd. But dog-gone it!—that two thousand gold, if we got the stuff through to Zorillo, looked like pure gravy. We could use it, it seemed like, now that we'd agreed to go straight and settle down. Yeah, I was too grasping. Sorry, pardner."

" 'S all right," said Thurston. The brittle quality in his voice softened a little. "Being free, white and having been of legal age more than thirty years, I'm likewise to blame. I'm sorry, too, mostly on your account. Me, I'm old. I've lived hard and can die in the same way. You're young. Life was spread before you up yonder, like a smiling range. There was that gal, for instance, over on the Nueces—"

"Why mention her?" said Dal.

"Why not? Face the facts, son. A rosy-cheeked gal like that, healthy as clover. There never was any woman like that, for me. The minute I saw the two of you together that day—just the way you looked at each other—I knew the hour had struck. Not for me, you understand. There could never be a woman for me now, nor a family, nor neighbors, nor any of those things. But there was still time for you to pull away from the Wild Bunch. At second hand, I could live all the old dreams I'd put off too long. By watching *you* come into the promised land. Got the picture?"

"Got it," said Dal. "Much obliged, old son."

"That's why I weakened on this deal, against my hunch," said John Thurston. "If we'd made it, it would have bettered your hand. We had three thousand salted away at Laredo. The two thousand for this job made it a real stake. There'd have been two thousand more if we'd made delivery. It would have bought that little spread up yonder, where neither King Gillette nor John Law could find you. Your own ground, free and clear." He sighed. "As for me, I was coming into the home-stretch, anyway. But it's a tough break for you, son."

"*Denada*—nothing—" said Dal. "But there's several things about this layout that I can't figure. For instance, answer me this one. How come Don Miguel saved us from the firing-squad? We're no pets of his."

"*Quien sabe?*" responded John Thurston. "But as I sized up Don Miguel during the trial, he's got more brains in his little finger than the rest of those lads combined. In his own way, he's a real poker player."

"You mean he had a purpose?"

"We'll see," said John Thurston.

Dal's handcuffs scraped harshly against the unyielding rock as he shifted his position. He groaned aloud. "Here's another," he said. "Since we've been teamed up together—ever since I joined up with King Gillette and his gang three years ago—you've stood between me and grief like a mountain. You've saved my scalp a dozen times over. There never was a tight corner we got into but what you had a few chips hidden away. You're like the fox that had a thousand tricks. This time—"

John Thurston chuckled dryly. "Say it, son. This time I fell down on the job, eh? Folded up and quit?"

"I didn't mean it that way," protested Dal. "You know that. But up at that trial, when they gave you a chance to talk, it seemed you could have run some kind of a bluff. Instead—"

"Hush!" warned John Thurston.

The sound of approaching footsteps

re-echoed in the vaulted corridor. A vague radiance strengthened beyond the grille.

"Listen, son," said John Thurston swiftly. "If my hunch is right, and it usually is, here comes a lad with a yen to play a little poker. If so, leave me do the dealing. Sit tight and follow my lead blind."

The jailer appeared, bearing a candle. He grinned upon them without mirth, displaying huge, glistening teeth. He placed the candle in a niche in the opposite wall, so that its glow illumined the cubicle, throwing the distorted shadow of the grille upon the two prisoners.

"Attention, gringo-dogs," he announced. "El Capitan Don Miguel y Fernando, Commandante!"

CHAPTER TWO

Don Miguel's Hole Card

IN that day and year, the officers of the Republic were garbed in resplendent uniforms befitting the dignity of a great commonwealth. El Capitan Don Miguel was no exception. As he stood in languid pose, watching the jailer depart, the candlelight behind him was reflected in gleaming buckle and spur, in the sheen of polished leather and braid of gold. The gloomy dungeon corridor formed a striking contrast to his glittering person.

When the jailer had gone he came close to the bars. He drew forth a silver case, extracted a long, slender cigarette, lighted it and flicked the match away. All the while, as unemotionally as one might have examined two animals in a cage, his black eyes scanned the prisoners. His very poise and elegance was strangely sinister.

"Your pardon, señores, if I address you in my own tongue," said he smilingly. "Though I have some knowledge of your language, you can certainly speak to better advantage in mine. Yes?" He placed a hand on the bars, then drew it away with a shudder of distaste. He produced a spotless handkerchief, dusted his fingers and waved the handkerchief in the air about him.

"As the senior officer of this American army, I address you, Señor Thurston," said he. "You may speak for both?"

"I can."

"Tell me, then, señor, since you have seen El Carrizal, you would like to go away from here, to return to your native Texas. Is that not so?"

"It is so."

In the Mexican manner, glowing end inward, Don Miguel held his cigarette between dainty fingers. He examined the ash critically. "Your name, Señor Thurston, is an honored one north of the Rio. There is a province in your Texas, the Count-ee Thurston, yes? Tell me—are you a person of substance north of the River? You have friends of wealth and position, perhaps?"

"I have none of these things; Señor Givens has even less."

A tiny frown wrinkled El Capitan's brow. "You are *bandidos* ordinary, then?" He sighed. "It is unfortunate. It is very unfortunate, my friend. There are none who would interest themselves in your behalf?"

"None," said John Thurston shortly.

"But look!" protested Don Miguel. "Give thought to this. The agents of the foul and unspeakable traitor, Zorillo, are cunning men. Do they intrust a mission so dangerous to *bandidos* ordinary?"

"I will explain all to your satisfaction," said John Thurston. "It chances that we have some little reputation north of the Rio, Señor Givens and I. This was known to the agents of Zorillo. Therefore, they made us an advance payment of two thousand dollars, *oro Americano*, to undertake the mission. Another payment was to be made if we were success-

ful." He shrugged his shoulders. "We did not succeed."

Don Miguel studied him, his black eyes veiled and intent. "This gold—the *bandidos* have taken it from you, yes?"

"No," said John Thurston. "Within an hour's ride of Laredo, in a certain arroyo known only to Señor Givens and myself, the gold is buried."

"Good," said Don Miguel. "And there is, perhaps, more gold buried in that certain arroyo?"

"There is three thousand more. A total of five thousand, American."

"Ah," said Don Miguel. "But that is all? This five thousand—it is your total wealth?"

"It is our total wealth," said John Thurston. "As one who has seen Carrizal, I speak the truth."

DON MIGUEL'S cigarette glowed as he inhaled deeply. He cast it down, ground it underfoot and blew a cloud of smoke upward. He drew forth the silver case and snapped it open.

"Draw near, señores," he invited softly. "Accept a cigarette while we discuss the heart of this matter."

The prisoners came forward and leaned against the wall on either side of the grille. Don Miguel placed a cigarette between the lips of each, lighted them and his own and waved the match aloft.

"Señor Thurston," said Don Miguel. "You are a *caballero* of much experience and blunt speech. Will you hazard a guess as to why I have honored you with this visit?"

"The whole world knows," said John Thurston, "that El Capitan Don Miguel would rather be torn by wild horses than to betray the Republic by becoming, perhaps lax, in his arduous duties here at Carrizal. But the whole world knows, also, that prisoners sometimes escape, even when guards are watchful and walls are high. The Señores Thurston and Givens are known to be desperate and lawless men. If they *should* escape, despite all precaution, who would dare to say that El Capitan had failed in his duty?"

Don Miguel puffed furiously, expelling the smoke through quivering nostrils. Then he nodded thoughtfully and spoke in judicious vein: "It is true. I can see that you intend no slight. It is a fanciful thought that you suggest, but let us pursue it further. If you should escape—and know, señor, that this is very fanciful indeed at El Carrizal—what then?"

"Then," said John Thurston, "as a token of our esteem, in that El Capitan Don Miguel treated us with such kindness and consideration during our brief visit at El Carrizal, we would send him a small present in gold. Being poor men, it would amount only to five thousand, American. The world would not know this. Why should they? It would be a private exchange of courtesies."

"Ah, Señor Thurston," said Don Miguel smilingly, "you are the skilled fencer, yes? You have put me at a disadvantage. I am ashamed to mention this proposed gift. I blush to do so. Yet I, too, will speak with your own admirable bluntness. Would it not be best that I should receive this gift *before* you escaped?" He spread his hands. "You can see that it would."

John Thurston shook his head. "It is impossible, El Capitan. None but Señor Givens and I know where the gold is hidden. And we have no friends to whom we could send a message."

Don Miguel considered him in silence for a space. Then, smiling still, but his eyes mirthless: "It is unfortunate, señor. I cannot hope to receive your generous gift. Nor, on the other hand, can you hope to escape." He sighed regretfully. "It is very unfortunate."

"There is a way, El Capitan," said John Thurston. "Do not judge it too swiftly. One of us might escape while the other remains behind. He who goes will hasten across the River and return with the gift. When it is delivered into your hands, the one who has remained behind will also escape. Thus the affair will be concluded with dignity and safety."

Don Miguel studied him unwinkingly. His black eyes scrutinized Dal, returned again to the older man. He scowled thoughtfully at the floor, twirling the waxed points of his mustache.

"It is a bizarre suggestion, señor," he said at length. "I blush to point out its many flaws, yet we must speak frankly. Let us assume first that as intelligent men who have seen Carrizal, you have spoken the truth concerning the gold that is buried in that certain arroyo. What will insure to me that the one who escapes will return with the gift?"

"It will be insured to you, El Capitan," said John Thurston, simply, "because the Señor Givens and I are friends of a type for which there is no suitable word in your language. We are what we Americans call—*pardners*. The one who escapes will return."

Don Miguel stroked his mustache. "I believe you," he said. "It is incomprehensible to me, but I know the gringo breed. The chance must be taken. After all, he who is left behind will more than repay the debt to the Republic."

He looked from one to the other, smilingly. "And now, señores, assuming that one of you escape despite all precautions, which one shall it be?"

THE prisoners looked at each other. It was on the tip of John Thurston's tongue to nominate himself for the dangerous mission. The escape itself, even with the help of Don Miguel, would bristle with menace. Don Miguel would not hesitate to slaughter one or both of his prisoners, should the occasion demand. He coveted the gold; but he feared public disgrace more. The man was both shrewd and unscrupulous. According to his code, no dishonor was involved in double-crossing gringo *bandidos*. It was not even beyond him to be considering, even now, how he could recapture his escaped prisoners, once the treasure was safely in his grasp.

John Thurston knew himself to be amply equipped to meet all these eventualities. It was the part of common sense, of good generalship, of ordinary vigilance, that he should undertake the task. Yet, looking into Dal's face, the words died on his lips. Afterwards, it seemed incredible that he should have misread what was written so plainly on Dal's awed, exultant features.

"Well, señores?" said Don Miguel.

"I'll go," said Dal. He was breathing heavily. "You've taken the hard knocks plenty times before, old son. Leave this to me. *Bueno?*"

"Bueno," said John Thurston.

He looked long and searchingly at the younger man. This picture of Dal's face —grim, glistening, yet alight with the incredulous awe of one who sees imprisoning walls crumbling before him—was destined to remain etched forever upon his memory.

"The Señor Givens," he said to Don Miguel, "will be the bearer of gifts."

"It is well," said Don Miguel. He drew closer to the bars. Though the corridor was deserted, he lowered his voice.

"Know, señores, that no Americans have ever escaped from El Presidio, yet men of extraordinary determination might mar this splendid record. The third day hence, for example, is a fiesta day, and on that day, according to the custom, the prisoners of the Republic will

be paraded across the plaza, so that the public may view them. The great gate will be open. The prisoners will be in chains, and it may be that the Señor Givens will be at the end of the line. Unfortunately"—he raised his eyebrows meaningly—"some of these chains are rusty with age and worn from much use. A strong man, who leaps back suddenly and throws his weight against them, might spread the links apart."

"Ah!" said John Thurston. "But the guards?"

"My men," said Don Miguel, with pride, "would die at my command. Unfortunately, in stress of excitement, they are poor marksmen. The plaza will be crowded with citizens, moreover. When it appears that a mad *Americano,* a desperate *bandido* of courage and determination, is unloosed upon them, they will scatter like sheep, each seeking to save his own skin." He shrugged his shoulders. "Who knows, under such circumstances, but that the *bandido* could make his way through the great gate in safety?"

Don Miguel's teeth flashed. "Consider, further, how fortune favors the brave. Directly opposite the great gate there is a fountain where passing *caballeros* water their thirsty horses. If, by incredible good luck, there chanced to be a vaquero stationed at this fountain, standing beside his horse, an animal of heart and speed—?

"And if the fugitive is wise," continued Don Miguel, very softly, "he will flee by way of Canyon Verde. Pursuit will follow Canyon Del Norte, which is the reasonable way to approach the River. The pursuers will return, desolated." Don Miguel spread his hands, arching his eyebrows in polite regret. "It is sad, yes?"

"Yes," said John Thurston. To Dal he added, in his own tongue: "You got all this, son?"

"Got it," said Dal.

El Capitan Don Miguel regarded them in silence for a space. Momentarily his black eyes were neither bland nor smiling. They were cold, calculating, almost reptilian in their intentness.

To John Thurston, he said: "To Laredo and return, allowing ample time, requires six to seven days. Instead, I will allow ten. That is generous, yes? If the affair is not concluded with honor and dignity at that time, you, Señor Thurston, will be held strictly to account. Is it understood?"

"It is understood," said John Thurston.

El Capitan drew himself up, heels together, and bowed from the hips. Again, twirling his waxed mustache, he was smiling, affable, at ease. "Felipe!" he called, the sound of his voice re-echoing in the corridor. The jailer came running. He halted beside Don Miguel, his small eyes roving from his commanding officer to the prisoners.

"Take them away, Felipe. Place each in his permanent cell in the west wing. With the leg-irons. Until after the fiesta, three days hence, place them on superior rations. Thereafter, they are prisoners ordinary."

SAFEGUARDS thrown about what the commandante had referred to as the permanent cells were simple but effective. Iron gates, which the jailer unlocked and locked again behind him each time he passed through, were at each end of a long, dimly-lighted corridor, one gate near John Thurston's cell; the other close to Dal's, cutting off chance for whispered communication. Each cell was likewise guarded by an iron grille.

The cubicles themselves were mere low-ceilinged, unlighted and unclean niches in the massive masonry. Midway between the grilled doorway and the stone shelf that served as a bed, a huge iron staple

was imbedded in the wall. To this was attached the prisoner's leg-iron, which gave him the freedom of the cell. The chain permitted him to reach the grille and receive food passed to him through a narrow opening near the floor, or to dispose himself for restless sleep upon his unyielding couch.

John Thurston, at first, paid little heed to his surroundings. Throughout his life he had been schooled to hardship. He had learned to dominate the thirsts, appetites and protests of his body, if there was an end in view. The harsh environment through which he had moved, the bleakness of existence as he saw it—a blistering desert in which green oases were few and far—had taught him patience.

Thus, during those interminable three days, he steeled himself only to wait. He was conscious of his heavy leg-irons, of the creeping and crawling things that infested the cell and his person, of the torture of his body when he attempted to sleep, of the stifling, fetid darkness that forever cloaked the dungeon cells. He knew that these things were eating into his stamina. But he knew also that his reserves were great and he could endure it.

"Mañana," he told himself grimly. After all, there were but three days to the fiesta. Ten more days of waiting, at most, would follow. Then freedom. What was this compared to a year at El Carrizal?

The hours of the day stretch were long. Interminably long. During this interval —and at night when the clanking of chains was stilled at last and the moaning from the cells became merely the bestial sighing of those who wrestle with tortured dreams—John Thurston sat alone with his thoughts.

Again and again he went over the details of the break, as Don Miguel had so briefly outlined it. It bristled with unknown factors. Could Dal actually tear loose from his irons and make it to the great gate as scheduled? Suppose the vaquero was not waiting at the fountain? Don Miguel had not mentioned whether a weapon of any sort would be included with the vaquero's horse. How, then, could Dal defend himself against wandering *bandidos* en route to the Rio?

He knew Dal's calibre, as the calibre of those who live beyond the pale are of necessity known to each other. The boy's courage and resourcefulness were unquestioned. Yet he was hot-headed, contemptuous of authority or restraint, bull-headedly inclined to act first and think afterwards. He held his captors, as a race and individuals, in low esteem, which was dangerous. From a dozen desperate tights in the past, with his, Thurston's help, he had emerged victorious. But how would he go it by himself?

He longed for a chance to talk to Dal, to reassure him, to strengthen his forces, to imbue him anew with his own unyielding determination. He had done it often before. There was no chance now. In his own cell far down the corridor, his pulses hammering like an athlete crouching at the starter's mark, no doubt, Dal was approaching the crisis alone.

In the depths of the night, when the moaning of the other prisoners had ceased, he contrived a message to Dal. It was meaningless, yet it seemed to bridge the gap between them. He took up the slack of the chain connecting his leg-irons to the wall, and surreptitiously struck two links together. It was a mere tapping, metallic sound, yet with a definite rhythm. Two short intervals. Two long. Two short. . . .

His heart leaped as the answer came back. Through the engulfing darkness the tiny sound smote, like a frail, muted echo. It was like a reaffirmation of faith, of

confidence, of courage. It was also their farewell.

THE day of the fiesta was ushered in by a distant ringing of bells, the far away murmur of many voices, an undertone of lilting music. Even in the dungeon cells of El Presidio, remote from the swirl and bustle of the outside world, it was plain that something unusual was afoot. The march of guards was more brisk. Their genial shouts re-echoed in the corridors. There was a sense of orderly confusion on the air, a jovial preparation for big events.

The march of the prisoners across the plaza, plainly enough, was but a minor event, a final gesture of the military spectacle. It would close the Presidio's contribution to the gala day. With the prisoners returned to their cells, all soldiers of the garrison, with the exception of the few unfortunate enough to draw necessary guard details, would be relieved of further duty until the following morning.

As he pondered this picture, John Thurston was filled with foreboding on Dal's account. Was it possible that an unarmed man, no matter how courageous or desperate, could make his escape in the very teeth of an armed garrison? It had seemed relatively simple, as Don Miguel had outlined it. It seemed wellnigh impossible now.

Don Miguel himself presently strolled into the corridor. Waving the guard back, he came directly to John Thurston's cell. The latter wondered how he could do this without arousing comment. He was to learn later what Carrizal already knew: that those prisoners singled out for the commandante's special attention merited pity rather than suspicion.

"Concerning the matter we previously discussed, señor," said Don Miguel, stroking his mustache, "there is a detail to be considered. I will also speak of it to the Señor Givens. All of my men are not hand and glove with me. A few, like Lieutenant Mario-Flores, the sub-commandante, are of other political factions. One of the guards who will walk beside the prisoners, for example, is not to be trusted. If he shoots, he shoots to kill. But I will arrange it so that he walks close to you, at the head of the column. If so—"

"If so," John Thurston nodded, "perhaps he might stumble and fall, so that the Señor Givens will have a moment or two to cross the plaza?"

"Perhaps, if he were to be tripped," El Capitan pointed out, "that would prove that you two have worked in unison, planning the escape. Truly, here are desperate men—yes?" He inclined his head carelessly and moved away.

At last the moment came. Felipe appeared, trailed by a squad of soldiers bearing coils of heavy chain. This was laid out on the corridor floor; a single chain into whose links, at three foot intervals, heavy handcuffs were welded. While the soldiers stood back, on the alert, Felipe opened the cells one by one. Motioning the prisoners forward, he handcuffed each to his place in the line.

John Thurston's heart sank as he felt the weight of the chain. A yoke of oxen, it seemed, could not break it. Yet, as he studied it, in view of what Don Miguel had said, he saw that there was a chance.

The handcuffs were not joined together, but were attached to a ring which was, in turn, a part of the chain. *If* the ring to which Dal was attached, at the end of the line, was faulty, a sudden wild lunge might spread it apart. Dal would not only be loosed from the chain. His hands would be free, though the individual manacles would still be upon his wrists.

Though he was under strict orders to face always to the front, John Thurston

stole a glance over his shoulder when the sounds told him that Dal had joined the end of the long line. It was a brief glimpse. It was terminated abruptly when a watchful guard prodded him none too gently with his bayonet. Yet it comprised a picture that stayed with John Thurston.

Either the previous three days had wrought havoc with Dal's morale, or he, too, was playing a part. His face, lacerated and swollen from blows of guards' *bastados,* was dark with a stubble of beard. His tawny hair hung in a mane over his eyes. His head was bowed; his shoulders drooped. Except for the indelible marks of the gringo upon him, he might have taken his place, unnoticed, in the dispirited, shambling column.

The soldiers fell in beside them, spaced at intervals down the file. Felipe opened the corridor door. A corporal, far down the line, gave the order to march. With a great clanking of the chain, the column got under way, heading for the stairway that led up to the sweltering plaza and the outer world.

CHAPTER THREE

Bullet Odds

THE reflected rays from the white walls and glittering company were blinding. At first, John Thurston received his impressions through the myriad sounds: the tramp of marching feet, the staccato commands of the officers, the restless movement and murmuring of many people massed together.

Gradually, through narrowed lids, he was able to peer about him. He looked first at Dal, and Dal looked back, his features expressionless. But John Thurston knew that his partner was not as broken and listless as he seemed. He, too, was steeling himself against the coming moment.

Under the circumstances, John Thurston would have viewed the spectacle of glittering uniforms and wheeling troops with sardonic but understanding interest. He saw each detail of the picture now, only as it affected Dal's chances.

These seemed slim enough. Either Don Miguel had outlined the scheme with his tongue in his cheek, knowing it was foredoomed, or his estimation of gringo calibre was high, indeed. More than a thousand people, including the military, were within the square. Guards patrolled the walls. Though the code required that the gate should be kept clear, the crowd choked it. A mass of spectators, at least twelve deep, joined pillar to pillar. Above their heads, at the rear, projected the fixed bayonets of the sentries. Could a single man, unarmed, hope to break through such a formidable cordon?

Furtively, he appraised the guard at his side, the one whom the commandante had said was not to be trusted. He was a burly fellow, heavy-browed and sullen, with an ancient knife-scar angling down from his prominent, swarthy cheekbone. When such a one was tripped up, he must be made to fall hard. A trained man of his type, contemptuous of possible danger to civilians, would make every effort to stop a fleeing prisoner.

The last maneuver was completed; the plaza cleared. The entire force of the garrison stood at ease against the west wall, directly opposite the great gate, while the column of prisoners was facing east. According to whispered instructions from the guard, they would swing north past the spectators, execute a column left to the west, thence past the mounted officers, column left again and return.

At Don Miguel's gesture, a stentorian-voiced officer of the garrison announced the event that would conclude the military spectacle. The prisoners would make a circuit of the square, so that all

good citizens could see and ponder.

Despite his iron self-control, John Thurston could feel himself trembling as the column got under way. It was not on his own account. The furious revolt stealing through his veins, the grim tightening of every nerve and fibre, was that of a father standing helpless on the sidelines while his son marches away to war. Always before—gladly, thankfully—he himself had assumed the greater risk in all crises they had met together. Now the boy whom he had sheltered and protected, who represented the sole friendship his harsh and lonely life had held, was forced to run the gauntlet alone. It was as though his very soul cried out in protest.

Yet there was nothing to be done, except to play his own part well, and not look back. John Thurston stepped out briskly to aid in Dal's maneuver. Slowly the chain tightened. As they drew abreast of the great gate, some fifty feet distant, the shambling line had lengthened to its fullest extent.

The crowded interval was but seconds long. Because John Thurston was at the head of the column, he was far past the gate before Dal, bringing up the rear, drew abreast. Momentarily it seemed that the youth's courage had failed, that he shrank from the attempt against such frightful odds. Then the chain jerked violently tight.

SO SUDDEN and furious was the effort that the forward progress of the whole line was halted. The pull slackened as suddenly. A great outburst came from the spectators—hysterical, tumultous, and over it all, Dal's voice roared. It was the fighting yell of the *Brasada,* the war-whoop of those who ride the Texas brush.

John Thurston looked back fleetingly. Dal was heading toward the gate, a wild and savage figure. So sinister was his appearance—head bowed, his broken manacles swinging, his lean, powerful body gathered together like a bull in the full fury of his charge, that the screaming civilians scattered like sheep from his path. They crowded one another, clawing desperately to escape. Dal plunged on, covering the narrowing distance in tremendous leaps.

Thereafter, many things happened at once. Officers spurred forth from their reviewing place, shouting to the guards. A bugle shrilled the alarm. Soldiers broke from the lines, rushing across the square to surround the remaining prisoners. Mario-Flores spurred toward the gate in a vain attempt to intercept Dal, tugging at his revolver. The swarthy guard at the head of the column of prisoners whirled and brought his rifle to his shoulder.

John Thurston hooked his toe about the man's ankle and brought him down heavily. When he struggled, cat-like, to hand and knee, and crouched thus to take further aim, the American threw himself to the farthest limits of his chain. He placed his foot against the man's back and again hurled him to earth.

It gave Dal the precious seconds required to reach the gate. This much John Thurston saw, exultantly. From that point on, his own sharply-defined images ceased.

A soldier, approaching from the side, swung his clubbed rifle with all his strength. Helpless to avoid it entirely, John Thurston lunged back. It struck him across the throat, a savage and crushing impact that hurled him to the unyielding cobble-stones. He lay where he had fallen, fighting for breath and unable to rise. His throat muscles were paralyzed, his mouth choked with blood, his brain reeling with suffocating pain.

Above the tumult, above the crack of rifles from the walls, rose the excited

screams of those on points of vantage in the guard towers, relaying the results of the chase. Through their words, as from a vague distance, John Thurston sensed the end of the drama.

The mad gringo was running like a very wolf. The guns would bring him down. He was doomed. But what was this? One stood at the fountain, beside his horse. The gringo was charging toward him. He was in the saddle—he was away! He was falling. He was wounded! No—with supreme cunning he was using the horse as a shield. He was away, riding like the very wind. He goes—he goes—*Dios!* He has made his escape! He is gone!

JOHN THURSTON was raised roughly to his feet. He stood swaying, his head thrown back, his manacled hands raised to his throat. He could breathe at last, in tortured fashion, like a swimmer who has been submerged too long in terrific depths. That he could breathe at all was of first importance. The words of the thin-lipped and haughty Lieutenant Mario-Flores registered but dimly upon him.

The gringo, Thurston, had connived at the escape. It was an offense that merited death, but in the absence of Don Miguel, he, Mario-Flores, would inflict only the punishment prescribed by the code for insubordination—twenty lashes. Thereafter, the gringo would be returned to his cell to await the pleasure of El Commandante.

Again, as he stood with his face pressed against a dark wall, his wrists raised high above him, John Thurston's impressions were vague. It was well that this was so. He felt the blows upon his naked back, but they were far away. Head bowed, he fought only for breath, his brain reeling as on the verge of a black abyss.

Long later, light shone through the bars of his cell. He was lying face downward on the stone shelf. Whether the guards had placed him thus, or he had assumed his position instinctively to protect his lacerated back, he could not tell. It was impossible to turn his head. His neck was rigid and swollen. But from the corner of his eye, peering up like a crippled animal, he saw that it was Don Miguel who loomed beyond the grille.

El Commandante's uniform was no longer glittering. It was tarnished, dusty and sweat-stained. Weariness was in his pose. He peered in at the prisoner, a cigarette glowing between his gloved fingers. "Though my men still pursue him," he said, softly, "it appears that the daring Señor Givens has made good his escape. This is sad, yes?" He sighed. "The unblemished record of El Carrizal is no more."

John Thurston strove to reply, but could make no sound. With a tortured effort, he turned on his side and pointed mutely at his throat.

The commandante nodded. "Your condition is unfortunate, señor; but what would you? Can I punish a soldier for rushing to the defense of the guard? Can I reprove Mario-Flores for inflicting the punishment of the code?" He shrugged his shoulders in polite regret. "These things were unforseen. I will send down the Presidio surgeon to look at your wounds."

His cigarette glowed. He cast it down, crushed it underfoot and expelled a cloud of smoke upward. "You understand, Señor Thurston, that this is unusual. Ordinary prisoners look to their own wounds. But for ten days, at least, you are much more valuable to me alive than dead." He smiled. "You are certain, are you not, that the Señor Givens will return?"

John Thurston could not reply. But his lips framed the words, as he nodded with tortured effort: "He will return."

CHAPTER FOUR

Hostage of Death

DURING the first five days, while he lay tossing on his bed in the white-walled hospital wing of the Presidio, the future meant little to John Thurston. The dangers and obstacles his partner might face could only be imagined. His own sufferings were real and close. In lucid intervals he steeled himself merely to wait and endure, to cling subbornly to life.

Nameless things had happened to his throat. Comprehensive though his knowledge of the language was, the terms used by the prison medico in describing his bodily hurts meant nothing. He gathered only that a miracle of muscular toughness and endurance had prevented his neck from being broken. Truly, these gringos had the stamina of the wolf!

It was the sixth day before he was able to speak above a whisper. The sound of his own voice appalled him. It was the voice of a stranger. His vocal cords had been partly paralyzed, no doubt; the larynx broken down. He spoke now with an effort, his formerly even, well-modulated tones changed to a harshness that seemed studied and peculiarly sinister.

On the seventh day he was sent back to his cell, though his back was not fully healed and his neck was still painful and stiff. He was now an ordinary prisoner, on ordinary rations, but he was not required to take his part in the daily round of toil prescribed for the others. When the shambling column was marched away each morning, he was left chained in his cell.

This fact did not mean that he was marked for special favor. It was exactly the reverse, so he gathered from the conversation of the guards. He had been listed as incorrigible, a dangerous man. El Commandante's memory was long. He was merely permitting the gringo to regain his strength. Then they would see what they would see!

John Thurston smiled grimly, listening to their gossip. They would be cheated of their expected enjoyment. The spectacle of a gringo in chains, marked as desperate and therefore at the mercy of any humiliation or petty torture they chose to inflict upon him, would be denied to them. Long before that time arrived he would be gone, to shake the dust of Mexico forever from his heels.

Hourly now he expected some hint from Don Miguel that Dal had returned. No hint came. As the eighth and ninth days dragged by, his worry and suspense caused him to forget his bodily pains. Over and over again he passed in review the various obstacles that might have delayed his partner. He might have failed to reach the River, on his way north. *Bandidos,* on the way back, might have ambushed him and taken the gold. He might now be in hiding outside the town, at a loss as to how to proceed. The possibilities of failure were endless. But for each possibility, in turn, John Thurston found a ready answer, born of his knowledge of his partner's calibre.

Then why the delay?

The tenth day came and went. The moaning of prisoners grew quiet in the night. Except for dim lights glowing at intervals down the dungeon corridors, utter darkness was abroad when John Thurston heard the unmistakable sounds that preceded the approach of an officer. Ribald conversation ceased in the quarters of the guard relief. A shuffling of feet told of all stiffening to attention.

FELIPE unlocked the corridor door and bowed the officer in. John Thurston's heart leaped when he saw that it was Don Miguel. His momentary hope died when he saw El Commandante's

face. It was thin-lipped, inflexible, unsmiling.

He halted before the grille and motioned John Thurston forward. The prisoner's chains clanked harshly as he complied. The commandante's politeness of manner had never been more menacing.

"Señor Thurston," said he, "it was a six day ride to Laredo and return. In the largeness of my heart—or is it because I have played the fool?—I have allowed ten days. Still Señor Givens, this 'pardner' in whom you have held such touching faith, has not returned. What have you to say to that?"

"I say," returned John Thurston, "that the difficulties have been many. He has been delayed."

"Ah!" said Don Miguel, cocking his head at the harsh inflection of the other's voice. "What bold front is this? You prefer to snap at me like the dog in the kennel, señor?"

"It is the throat, El Capitan. I can not speak otherwise now. No offense is intended."

Don Miguel shrugged. "No matter. The time for the exchange of courtesies is past. I come to you tonight to tell you that my memory is long. You owe a debt not only to the republic, but also to me—El Commandante. Look to yourself henceforth, señor. That is all."

He turned on his heel. John Thurston drew closer, grasping the bars.

"Wait, El Capitan. One moment, I beg of you. You have many trusted men. Send a spy to Laredo to seek out and talk to the Señor Givens, to learn why he has been delayed."

"Bah!" said Don Miguel, halting. He showed his teeth now in a smile that was not good to look upon. "What nonsense is this? Do you *still* dream that the dog, Givens, will return? Know, señor, that I have already done as you suggest, two days after the escape—not on your account, but on mine. I wished to assure myself of what I am already certain—that I have been made the fool. My agent should return tomorrow."

"And when he returns," said John Thurston, "oblige me by giving me his report."

"It shall be done," agreed the commandante.

And still he hesitated, looking at his prisoner curiously.

"You are incomprehensible to me, señor," he said. "You may pretend with me, but it is incredible that you should believe your own pretense."

"What do you mean, El Capitan?"

"The Señor Givens is young," said Don Miguel. "Life is sweet to him. He dreams dreams and has many inviting prospects before him. He is safe again in his native Texas. The gold, which once belonged to you both, is now his. Having once crossed the Rio"—he spread his hands, palms upward—"why should he return?"

"What you are suggesting is impossible," said John Thurston. "I would wager my life on it."

"A correction, señor," said the commandante, softly. "You have already wagered your life on it. It appears that you have lost."

Again and again during the long night, like wolves circling about the kill, John Thurston's thoughts centered upon the dark suspicion Don Miguel had raised. It seemed incredible, at first, and it was easy enough to throw off, to greet it with an inner, sardonic smile. He and Dal had seen and suffered too much together, eaten of the same food, drunk of the same bitter wine. Dal, too, had seen Carrizal. This fact, far from causing him to hesitate and hang back, would merely steel his determination to effect the rescue at the earliest possible moment.

Moreover, while his pardner had many

faults, greed was not one of them. That he was now in possession of a greater amount of gold than had ever before touched his careless life could not in itself induce him to abandon his pardner. Reckless and impetuous though he was, inclined to act first and think afterwards, his integrity was above price or question.

And yet—what was the answer?

Because, during his harsh and sunless life, John Thurston had schooled himself to overlook no bets, to face facts and not theories, one damning concession was forced upon him ere morning came. It was like the slow undermining of a hitherto unyielding barrier, the eating of acid into the tough and durable fabric of his soul. What Don Miguel had suggested was incredible only because it was contrary to his own code. But could he vouch for Dal with the same certainty when the supreme test came?

He knew that he could not. He could wager his life on it. He had already done so, as Don Miguel had also suggested. And still he could be wrong.

Having admitted this much, he closed his mind to further speculation. Tomorrow—once more—should tell the tale. When Don Miguel's spy returned.

IN THE morning John Thurston's cell was unlocked and he was brought forth to take his place in the line of prisoners. Heavy leg-irons, newly forged, were placed on his ankles.

They were led up into the heat and glare. As John Thurston had already gathered, the daily labor of the prisoners consisted at the moment of construction work within the Presidio. Walls must be repaired, cobble-stones replaced. A civilian stone mason was in charge, where technical skill was required. Guards lolled in the shade. The fetching and carrying, the shaping of stones, was done by the prisoners themselves, dragging their heavy chains behind them.

That first day told John Thurston why officers of the court-martial had smiled when Don Miguel had suggested a year at Carrizal. His wounds and the revolting food since he had returned to his cell had already sapped his endurance. Roughly-woven, high crowned sombreros had been provided the prisoners, but the blazing sunlight of the square was pitiless and savage. Perspiration blinded him. His leg-irons chafed his ankles.

In mid-afternoon he fell, and did not rise. Sharp blows of the *bastada* upon his unhealed back drove him to new frenzies of effort. When he fell again, it was into merciful oblivion.

He regained consciousness at sundown, when the prisoners were ready to be returned to their cells. Mario-Flores was reprimanding the guards. It was the purpose of El Commandante to make an example of the gringo Thurston. He must be watched with vigilance, to see to it that he did not pretend illness or weakness and thereby avoid his share of the labor. But he must not be driven too hard at first, or broken too quickly. Much experience awaited him. El Commandante himself would see to it that the spit was turned slowly, so that the roast would not burn!

And when Don Miguel himself came down that night to inspect the prisoners, the true purpose of his visit was revealed only to John Thurston. They stood eye to eye, with the grille between them. It was their last conversation together.

"Señor," said the commandante, simply, "my agent is back from the Rio. Your *'pardner'*, Givens, will not return."

John Thurston gripped hard on the bars to hold himself up. "Go on, El Capitan."

"That is all," said Don Miguel. "What else?"

"You have not told me why," said John Thurston.

The commandante shrugged. "Who knows? I will tell you only what my agent has observed. El Givens made the crossing of the Rio in early morning. He is in the ragged clothing in which he escapes. That night, in your largest hotel, he is seen in new clothes, freshly-shaved; a dashing *caballero*. He engages the best room. Many companions join him there. Much food and much wine in bottles goes through the door. It is the carousal. It lasts all night. That is the first day."

"And the second day?"

"It is the same. The Señor Givens is very drunk and very happy. He spends much money. He drinks often. He eats much food. He plays the game called poker. That night, in his room, there is again the carousal. My agent listened outside the door. Once, while they are making merry, El Givens offers a toast. I give it to you in my poor English. He has said, with a pretense of sadness: 'To my pardner, Thurston, who is one more fool that has crossed the Rio. He rots in a Mex jail.' And the others laughed."

"AH!" SAID John Thurston. "And the Señor Givens—did he also laugh?"

"The loudest of his company," said Don Miguel. "That is the second day. On the third day, he rides north with a party of your *bandidos,* the ones who have been his companions. The name of the chief of these *bandidos*"—El Commandante frowned thoughtfully and shook his head—"it is a well-known name, my agent says. I regret that it has escaped me."

"Not King Gillette?" said John Thurston, between his teeth.

"That is it!" Don Miguel nodded. "It is the King Gillette. One with a nose like the vulture and the glittering eye of the snake. They ride to the northwest, toward the river called the Nueces. El Givens is beside the King Gillette, and they are like two brothers."

John Thurston released his grip on the bars slowly and retreated backward into his cell. He seated himself upon his ledge of stone. His chains clanked into silence. Don Miguel moved a little aside to where the dim light of the corridor shone into the dungeon; but his prisoner's expression revealed nothing.

"Is it enough, señor?"

"What you have told me is sufficient," said John Thurston. "I was wrong. He will not return."

Don Miguel waited politely, almost expectantly. It appeared that the prisoner had nothing more to say. The commandante, therefore, bowed from the hips. It was a polished, yet sardonic gesture. John Thurston was under no illusions as to its intent. It was like the careless wave of the hand to one whose trail leads toward death.

"I give you the farewell of the plains, señor. *Vaya con Dios.*"

"Con Dios," responded John Thurston.

El Commandante went away, marveling. Most incomprehensible of all, in this gringo breed, was their ability to sit, unmoved, while their world crashed in ruins about them and the treasures of their heart became as dust and ashes at their feet. It had been no pretense with the gringo Thurston, plainly enough. He had believed in his "pardner" to the end. Yet he had received this blow—compared to which the lash of the *bastada* was as nothing, and death itself merely a jest—as calmly, as stoically as though he sat among friends where lights were bright and many prospects beckoned, playing the game called poker.

The gate clanged behind him, the debonair commandante. His footsteps died in the distance.

John Thurston's chains grated harshly once as he stretched himself painfully on the unyielding rock. It was not alone to protect his throbbing back that he lay on his side, his head pillowed on his arm. Thus disposed, in spirit as in body, his face was to the wall.

CHAPTER FIVE

Crucible of Hate

THE trail of most Border men of John Thurston's stamp would have ended here. With escape impossible and life unendurable—their last faith and hope destroyed—they would have selected that course of action that leads swiftest to the grave. With the final chip gone and no more stakes in view, what is left but to quit the game?

For men of that mold, at Carrizal, it would have been easy to do. An open defiance of the guards, or a futile attempt at escape, carefully staged to bring a hail of bullets or a swift stroke of a bayonet. . . . Other means, more slow, but none the less inevitable, were at hand.

During the first hours of that long and terrible night when the scales fell from his eyes, when he saw himself for the first time in his true relation to the world, himself and his former partner, Dal Givens, John Thurston passed each of these means of self-destruction in review. He discarded them all, one by one. He did not know at first why he did this. He did not fear death. Life held no promise. Then why hesitate?

He knew, ere morning came. There *was* a prospect in the future, after all; an end in view toward which he yearned more eagerly than he had ever thirsted for sparkling water, more savagely than he had ever craved food. Always before, he had classified this thing that had seized upon him as a luxury of weakness, the unreasoning gesture of lesser men. He knew now that it was the strongest force that had ever touched his life, that all the stubborn resources of his nature were at its beck and call.

It was the thing called hate.

Only once in his crowded career, and that briefly, had he permitted himself to hold malice toward his fellow man. There had been an instant, short weeks before, when he and Dal had stood side by side in the gray of dawn, their guns out and the stakes in the open, facing King Gillette and his killers. In that split second preceding the showdown, a madness had come to him. He had known, in a flash of blinding realization, that win or lose—whether Dal stayed by him or chose to remain with the Wild Bunch—he proposed to kill King Gillette. Never again would this crafty outlaw chief use hot-headed and trusting youths to his own advantage, as a smoke-screen to cover his own trail, later abandoning them to prison bars, to the gallows, or to unmarked graves in the brush country. He, John Thurston, proposed to stamp him out.

But the man whom Don Miguel's spy had described so aptly as having "the beak of the vulture and the glittering eye of the snake," had backed down. In the triumph of that realization, his own momentary madness had passed. They had ridden away, he and Dal, into new trails and new horizons.

His rage toward King Gillette had been a sudden flash; and had gone as quickly. The flames that roared against Dal were of a different order. His, John Thurston's, life had held but few treasures, few faiths, few creeds. All these had centered about Dal; and Dal, at one blow—deliberately—had destroyed them all.

That it was deliberate was beyond question. Two things reported by Don Miguel's spy proved that it could not be otherwise. Neither the spy nor Don Miguel could have fabricated two of the state-

ments contained in the report. These carried their proof upon their face. The first was Dal's toast, couched in words that only Dal could have uttered. "One more fool who has crossed the Rio," was his, John Thurston's, own phrase, spoken often to Dal in their discussions of Border traffic, and to none other.

The second was more casual, but even more damning. It had been thrown in by the spy merely to round out his report. Don Miguel had repeated it in the same manner. "They have ridden into the northwest side by side, like two brothers."

This meant that Dal had been faithless from the beginning; that he had held neither affection nor respect for him, John Thurston; that Dal had used the pardnership merely to suit his own purposes. With his pardner out of the way, his usefulness done, Dal had taken their joint resources and turned back to the Wild Bunch, chuckling.

"Let him rot in a Mex jail," Dal had said. He had laughed the loudest. And he had ridden away with King Gillette.

IT WAS not a sudden thing, this smouldering in John Thurston's veins that in the end was to become the guiding force of his life. Because his faith in Dal had been so complete, it gave ground slowly, even in the face of overwhelming proof. Most damning of all—the point to which he returned again and again during those lonely and frightful hours—was that Dal, with freedom in his grasp, had ridden away with King Gillette. This fact could not be brushed aside, nor explained away, nor forgiven. It explained all. And destroyed all.

There was the girl, for example, who was waiting for Dal on the Nueces. And that certain homestead hidden away in a sheltered canyon on the north bank of the Frio. To buy this homestead—free and clear, guaranteed to Dal's heirs and assigns forever—they had crossed the Rio for a price in gold. On the girl's account, and on Dal's, he had forced the showdown with King Gillette.

A hundred times, in lonely camps, he had dreamed dreams about that homestead. Through Dal's eyes—as always—he had glimpsed the promise and splendor of living that life had denied to him. To safeguard them for Dal he had risked all and would gladly have sacrificed all. Vaguely, somewhere in the background, exulting placidly in Dal's happiness, he himself had been a part of the picture. Whittling in the shade. Listening to Dal's woman singing at her work. Watching the children at play.

Dal had swept all this ruthlessly away. Had he, once the Rio was behind him, decided to abandon his partner, take the gold and depart for the Nueces, and the farther Frio, the act would have been understandable. Out of the greatness of his own love for Dal, he could have forgiven it. Why spend the gold to ransom one who would have had but a few years to enjoy, at most, in the hidden sanctuary on the Frio?

But Dal did not have even this excuse. He had wasted the gold in a wild and prolonged debauch. The girl to whom he had given his promise could wait in vain. His partner could rot at Carrizal. Someone else could till the fertile fields and watch sunsets fade along the Frio. What of it?

And he had ridden away with King Gillette.

John Thurston knew, ere morning came, that he had passed a crossroads of life. It was as though a corrosive acid had eaten away the softer tissues of his being, leaving only that which was hard and bitter and unyielding behind. An iron purpose had come to him, so he swore to himself in the solitude of his

cell. To achieve it, bodily pain meant nothing. No torture of mind or body could swerve him from it. Even the walls of grim Carrizal would crumble before him, when the moment was at hand. Neither miles nor years could intervene. It was written in the cards, already woven into the inexorable pattern of human affairs.

It was a simple purpose, with the simplicity of an arrow that drives straight to the mark. It consisted of three steps. First he would escape from Carrizal. Second, he would cross the Rio and find Dal Givens. Third, having found him, he would repay a debt—to the world, to the girl who had waited in vain, and to John Thurston—by destroying him utterly.

PRESIDIO guards of the day and night reliefs were mystified at the bearing of their star prisoner.

The "silent gringo," as he was speedily designated, was known to be an incorrigible, a dangerous man. Yet overnight, so it seemed, his demeanor changed. His eye no longer held the proud and lofty look of the lion in chains. It was vague and dispirited, given to gazing unseeingly at the walls of his cell, or at the countryside glimpsed through the great gate. Springs of life seemed to have dried up in him. He suffered the indignities, punishment, hard labor and other routine hardships of existence at El Carrizal without protest or apparent interest.

Discussion raged about it, among the guards of the day relief and in the dungeon quarters by night. Opinion was divided. Some believed that the silent gringo had, in fact, given up. His soul had died within him. What, after all, could he hope to gain by pretense? The end would be the same.

Others pointed out that the mind of the gringo moved along incomprehensible lines. No man could state with a certainty what they would dare to scheme or carry out. There was the Señor Givens, for example, the one who had escaped. He, too, had adopted an ox-like bearing. He had appeared to be broken and beaten. And behold his exploits on the day of the fiesta!

Mario-Flores himself, to whom Don Miguel had given charge of the prisoners, obviously inclined to this latter viewpoint. Daily, during the first two weeks, he inspected the leg-irons that were a part of John Thurston's working equipment. Religiously, each night, he descended to the cell to see with his own eyes that the American's chains, bars and the corridor gates were impregnable. Again and again he impressed upon the guards that if *this* gringo should escape, much that was unfortunate was in prospect for all, from Don Miguel down.

John Thurston was aware of all this, with an awareness that would have startled the most suspicious of his guards. It was easy for him to play his part. Having absolute faith in his ability to reach the sole remaining goal of life, over all obstacles, he had the capacity of infinite patience. There was plenty of time. The more careful the preparation, the more certain the chance of success. He must not fail, for the attempt could be made but once.

By a process of elimination he had arrived at the sole possible means of achieving that which was deemed impossible—an escape, unassisted, from Carrizal. The triple safeguards thrown about him by night—his leg-irons, stapled to the wall, the bars of his cell and the locked gates of the corridor—made a break from the dungeon out of the question. It must be attempted during the day, therefore, while the prisoners were at work.

Three obstacles stood in the way. He must first elude his guards and make it to the west wall. He must scale the wall.

Once over the wall he must cross the long two hundred yards that intervened to the sheltering mesquite of the plateau. All these, in the presence of scores of armed soldiers who would shoot to kill, seemed insurmountable.

But first, before the dash to the wall was attempted, the chain linking his ankles together must be cut through. How accomplish this in the face of Mario-Flores' rigid inspection and under the very eyes of the guard?

This, too, was included in his plan.

DURING those first terrible weeks he merely played his part. He paid no heed to the jibes, indignities and bodily punishment inflicted upon him. He held no animosity toward the guards. Each blow and curse, each separate refinement of torture caused by the food, the heat, the vermin swarming his cell, merely added to a lengthening column in another ledger.

Gradually as the interest of the guards waned, their vigilance relaxed. The silent gringo had proved a disappointment, after all, so easily had his courage, his great body been broken. He was merely one of the many bearded, ragged, shambling hopelessly in their chains. His days were numbered now. He would soon join those others on the blistering ridge, where weathered crosses marked the graves of those who had seen Carrizal.

By night, in his cell, John Thurston checked and classified each detail he had observed during the day. He built up a mental picture of the interior of the Presidio that was photographic and exact. Because each soldier quartered at Carrizal must take his turn at day and night guard, he had an opportunity to observe them all. They paid little heed to him, as the days passed, but he knew them all by name. The calibre of each was analyzed and filed away.

Deliberately, as a part of his plan, he showed an aptitude for the shaping of stones that went into the walls, rather than in the masonry work or in the fetching and carrying. Because it was easiest to permit him to do that for which he was best fitted, he was left in the group that sat, hour by hour, their small, narrow-faced hammers chipping away the brittle rock. This not only gave John Thurston a chance to observe all that was going on about him. It was a specific preparation for the great moment.

A certain guard, a swarthy, blustering fellow named Sebastian, was the one John Thurston decided must be on the west wall when the attempt was made. Sebastian was a Mayan half-caste, raised from peonage by the uniform of the Republic. Because of his lowly origin, his malice toward the gringo prisoner persisted long after that of the others. That he could kick and belabor a white man, without fear, and a gringo, at that, raised him to high pinnacles of delight.

It was not for these reasons that John Thurston marked him for his own. As an individual, the ex-peon did not exist. But he had noted long before in life that he who is bravest when the lion is in chains will run the fastest when the chains are broken. Such a blustering one must be on the wall when the moment came.

The leg-irons, locked upon John Thurston's ankles each morning and removed each night, were joined by twenty links. Each link was some two inches in length and composed of malleable, non-tempered iron of about the thickness of his forefinger. Being newly forged, these comprised a chain that the strength of a hundred men could not have broken. Their weight, plus the shortness of the chain, made movement slow and running impossible.

Thus the guards were least of all con-

cerned with their prisoner during the day. The leg-irons could not be broken. Nothing could be done while the chain joined his ankles. Therefore, the prisoner was secure. The general acceptance of this fact comprised the starting point upon which John Thurston builded.

In a futile attempt to keep their ankles from becoming chafed, all the prisoners stuffed rags between the enclosing jaws of the leg-irons and the raw, quivering flesh. John Thurston did this, too, except that he caused these protecting rags, on his left ankle, to cover the first three links of the chain. During the day, these rags were loose about the three links. Before returning to the dungeon at night, where the chain was removed and left outside his grille, he saw to it that the three links were securely covered.

There came a day when the prisoners were set to work on a certain wall within the quadrangle, just inside the great outer rampart. A segment of this minor wall, where a crack had developed in the masonry, must be torn down. Many of the old stones could be used in the rebuilding, but a few must be shaped for the purpose.

John Thurston calculated the time that would be required for the repairs. During the last stages of the repairs, he knew, a certain ladder must be used to lay and mortar the final tiers of stone. This ladder, if placed against the west rampart, would fall but five feet short of the broad battlement where the guard paced. His knowledge of the guard relief also told him that Sebastian, during the latter interval, would be on the wall.

On that day, therefore, when the repairs began, John Thurston struck his first blow for freedom.

He sat, in the scorching heat of mid-afternoon, on a huge fragment of rock. With a narrow-faced hammer, he tapped upon the small stone he was shaping, turning it slowly and methodically. He would pause at intervals to peer listlessly at his handiwork, squinting along its edges to make sure that it was shaping to true form.

The chain hung slack between his ankles. The second link from the left lay upon a fragment of rock, with the shielding rags pushed back. He struck this link a sharp blow with his hammer, causing the chain to jangle harshly.

The drowsing guards paid no heed. The noise of many chains was on the air. John Thurston continued to shape his stone. But the soft iron of the link was indented a little, above and below.

Twice, sometimes three times, each hour thereafter, he struck the link in the same manner and on the same spot. It would require several hundred such blows. He gauged his progress by the height of the wall. Each night, before returning to the dungeon, he wrapped the rags cunningly and securely about the weakening link.

CHAPTER SIX

El Diablo Thurston

EXCEPT to Don Miguel and a small group of his trusted men who knew that it had been pre-arranged, the escape of Dal Givens had been staggering enough. The exploits of John Thurston, the silent gringo—who had been presumed, long since, to be broken in body and spirit—were simply an incredible madness.

Nine days after the repairs were begun on the minor wall, after striking an average of thirty blows each day on the same spot, the link was flattened and spread apart. John Thurston began immediately on the second link from his right ankle. This one gave way on the seventh day. He spread it apart; and

covered both broken links with the foul and discolored rags.

He had timed it exactly. The wall upon which they were working—it was a storehouse wall that projected at right angles from the main battlement—was completed to the last tier. The ladder now leaned five paces from the point where wall and rampart joined.

It was four o'clock—forty-seven days after Dal Givens had escaped, and almost at the same hour. The guard was changed. Sebastian emerged from the square bastion at the northwest corner, yawning, and began walking his post along the broad rampart. Sebastian halted above the prisoners, leered complacently at John Thurston and bandied witticisms with the guards. He leaned for a space on his rifle, then passed on.

Returning, he halted again above the prisoners. They were grouped in the shade, making the merest pretense of working. The stone mason lay sprawled, his head on his chest. The guards leaned against the sheltering wall, their feet braced, their eyes heavy-lidded from the drowsy heat.

John Thurston laid his hammer down. Slowly, with a stupid movement, he raised his shaggy head to peer at the wall. His glance also took in the rampart above. He looked again at the rock in his hand, turning it over slowly. Then he rose up, his shoulder slumped, and approached the ladder.

This, too, he had prepared for carefully. Many times, during the preceding days, he had mounted the ladder painfully, his chains dragging on the rungs below him, to try out the dimensions of a particular stone. In the eyes of the guards, this had been merely amusing. Such an interest in his work, with no reward in prospect, was proof enough of harmless insanity.

They watched him now only because his antics promised relief from the deadly dullness of the hour. Sebastian leaned on his rifle, grinning. John Thurston approached the ladder, head bowed, the stone held in his listless fingers.

It was a small stone, its dimensions somewhat smaller than those of common brick. The place on the tier, ready to receive it, was a little to the left of the ladder's top. John Thurston, after studying the situation with bovine intentness, placed his stone on the ground. With apparent effort he took hold of the ladder and moved it over. Stooping, he took up the stone again.

But to the delight of the guards, he had not shifted the ladder far enough. This fact appeared to register upon their prisoner's addled brain only after he had reached the top. Retracing his steps, he placed his stone on the ground with great deliberation and moved the ladder again.

Sebastian roared with glee. The guards grinned unwillingly. Even the prisoners watched the by-play with a faint and dejected amusement. For John Thurston had moved the ladder much too far. It now leaned less than arm's length from the corner and entirely out of reach of the point he was attempting to achieve. When he reached the top and discovered this fact, it should be funny indeed!

John Thurston mounted slowly. His progress was laborious on account of the chains on his ankles and the stone in his hand. When he reached the top he stared stupidly at the unfinished tier. He extended his arm toward it, but it was much too far. The ladder all but toppled over. The guards guffawed aloud.

John Thurston made as if to descend again. But the slack of his chain hung inside the rung next below. He considered this problem stolidly for a space. Then he balanced the stone on the top of the ladder, which left his right hand free. He reached down and raised up the chain.

At the same time, with fingers that did not tremble, he unhooked each broken link.

WHEN he straightened up, the chain was in his hand. The laughter of the guards died away. He tossed it from him. It gyrated through the air, coiling and uncoiling like a snake. It clanged harshly upon the cobblestones. While the guards watched this feat of magic, open-mouthed, and Sebastian leaned outward above him, the better to see what was transpiring, the fingers of John Thurston's right hand closed upon the stone.

Sebastian was almost directly above him. He could not miss. He hurled the stone with all his strength. It caught the sentry full on the chest. His breath bursting from him under the impact, Sebastian fell backward from the rampart into space. His rifle clattered after him.

John Thurston leaped from the top of the ladder. Under the piston drive of his legs, the ladder slid away beneath him. Only the clutch of his fingers on the edge of the rampart saved him from likewise falling back. He hooked an elbow and a leg over the edge and with a cat-like movement hoisted himself up.

Bedlam broke forth below him. He did not look back. The sinister clicking of rifles from the guard below, from the north and south walls, told him what he already knew: that his margin of safety henceforth would be measured in split seconds. Had the leap before him been a thousand feet instead of thirty, he would have had no choice. He hurled himself out into space. Even as he fell, the notes of a bugle rose above the din within the walls, sounding the general alarm.

Had there not been a wave of sand thrown up like surf against the wall, the bold and desperate break would have ended there. But he plowed at an angle down the face of the sand drift. He fetched up against Sebastian's flabby hulk, which further broke the impact.

Sebastian lay, winded and gasping. John Thurston took up his rifle and the two extra clips of cartridges from his bandolier. Bullets threw sand blindingly in his face as guards on the wall opened fire. Other soldiers were swarming from the corner bastions. Mario-Flores appeared, brandishing his revolver and shouting orders.

"Up, son of evil!" commanded John Thurston, prodding Sebastian with his toe. "Up, I tell you! Must I use a dead man for a shield?"

Sebastian, a roaring lion no longer, lurched to his feet. He was sobbing with terror. John Thurston laid hold on his belt and dragged him backwards, step by step, protected by his bulk.

There was a momentary lull, then bullets kicked up puffs of sand about them again. Mario-Flores, snatching a rifle from one of his men, knelt to take better aim. Ruthless as John Thurston's scheme had been, the sub-commandante, plainly, was even more ruthless. What was the life of a common soldier compared to the honor of the Republic?

"Dios!" whimpered the sentry. "They shoot at me! At me—Sebastian! Save me, señor. Fly, I beg of you!"

"Dig!" commanded John Thurston. He forced his prisoner to his knees behind a tiny hummock of sand. "Dig with your hands. Pile up sand."

They scooped up a miniature bulwark and flattened behind it. Sand sprayed them in stinging jets. Bullets lashed overhead. John Thurston inched cautiously above his parapet and drew careful aim at Mario-Flores. He had no wish to kill the sub-commandante, nor to shed more blood than was necessary. He had room in his heart for only one hate. He aimed at a point just below the bars on the officer's right shoulder.

Mario-Flores staggered back into the arms of a soldier. The others flattened along the rampart. The loopholes in the corner bastions continued to spout flame. New jets of sand exploded in John Thurston's face. He fired a salvo in return, and another; and thrust in the last clip.

He knew that it could not continue. His present position was impossible. He had been able to retreat less than a third of the distance across the exposed area. He had hoped to silence the return fire long enough to scurry back to new shelter, and from thence, trusting to the poor marksmanship from the walls, to make it to the spiked jungles leading up to the westward mesa.

But those in the shelter of the bastions could not be silenced. He knew, without seeing it, that the great eastern gate of the Presidio was swinging open. Mounted men were spurring forth. These, in a matter of minutes now, would encircle him and cut him off.

HE GLANCED back over his shoulder. Close at hand was a stretch of sand, a hundred and fifty yards of it. Beyond was the spiked jungle leading up the mesa. There was a break in the wall, a boulder-strewn arroyo leading up to farther heights. If he could make it to the mesquite and then to the arroyo—

The moment his eye caught and checked these details, he evolved his strategy. It was this phase of it that caused his name to be recorded in the legends of Carrizal as El Diablo Thurston.

He had but one clip of five cartridges left. He fired two rounds at the southwest bastion, which was close at hand; and two at the northwest. He aimed carefully, coolly. He knew that his bullets had ricocheted through the loop-holes, spraying lead upon the occupants. He had one shell left when a troop of mounted men spurred past the northwest corner of the Presidio.

He fired above the head of the leader. This one flinched back. Sand plowed in air as the others pulled up with desperate haste, circled and spurred back to cover. In full view of those on the wall, John Thurston thrust his empty rifle, muzzle down, in the sand.

"Look," he told his whimpering companion. "I am unarmed. I have no weapons. Remember that, when the others come."

He turned and charged toward the mesquite. He zigzagged as he ran, like a rabbit in flight. No strategy was involved here, no effort at concealment. He merely pinned his faith on the laws of chance and his guiding star of destiny.

His star saw him through. A fog of leaping sand trailed him, surrounded him, scattered far and wide about him. Out of the welter of it he emerged, untouched, and so plunged into the security of the mesquite.

He knew that this security was only temporary. The mounted detachment, gaining heart, were already thundering in pursuit. For a time, in the thorny jungle, one afoot would be on even terms with mounted men. But sooner or later he would he run to earth.

He dashed down one glade and back another, plunged blindly through into a farther aisle. He did not feel the pain caused by the lance-like thorns, nor the chafing of the leg-irons on his lacerated ankles. He forged on relentlessly, working ever toward the heights. Behind him he could hear the crashing progress of his pursuers and their shouts.

A great outburst came from the walls as he mounted into view above the mesquite. Exultant yells echoed from the jungle. He had made it almost to the mouth of the arroyo when the first of

the mounted detachment emerged from the brush.

A burst of firing followed, but they were random shots and went wild. He plunged up the arroyo, his breath whistling between his teeth, his perspiration-dimmed eyes fixed on the terrain above.

The arroyo narrowed. The walls grew precipitous. A towering shoulder of weather basalt loomed ahead. He halted abruptly beyond it and scrambled upward until he was head high to a mounted man. Here he waited, flattened like a lizard against the blistering rock.

He was none too soon. Spurring furiously, less than a hundred yards behind, the horsemen thundered. Knowing that he was unarmed, they came with a rush. Being certain—as John Thurston had hoped they would—that he would run blindly until he dropped, or was run down, they swept by the shoulder of basalt one by one. They did not look back. Teeth bared in grins of delight, their weapons ready, they undulated from view in the winding niche.

Peering cautiously down the slope, John Thurston saw a belated rider coming. It was Don Miguel himself. El Commandante had secured a horse and was raging in pursuit. Had he been less a soldier, he would have waited for his subordinates to effect a capture that seemed to be certain. Had he been more cautious, he would have come slowly.

Being both spirited and full of wrath, El Commandante rode like one possessed. John Thurston tensed himself, his back to the wall, prepared for an explosive thrust with hands and feet. As the head of the splendid horse appeared, ears flattened and dripping muzzle extended in the fury of its effort, he hurled himself.

IT WAS a daring and near incredible maneuver, perfectly timed, faultlessly executed. His right hand found the pommel beneath Don Miguel's crouching body; his left arm thrust downward against the animal's neck, his hand clutching the breast-strap. His body, jerked forward and across the saddle, hurled Don Miguel to earth.

All but dazed though he was by the impact, John Thurston remained aboard. He pulled up the frenzied horse, wheeled and spurred back. El Commandante lay where he had fallen, conscious but incapable of speech or movement. He struggled for breath, his black eyes burning up at his captor. Rage was in their depths, humiliation and a certain awe.

John Thurston dismounted and bent over him. He unstrapped the fallen man's belt and holster and strapped them on. Already incredulous shouts were re-echoing in the arroyo. Returning hoofbeats were growing louder.

He swung into the saddle and saluted ironically. "I return to you the greeting of the plains, El Capitan," said he. *"Vaya con Dios!"*

Even in his extremity, Don Miguel revealed himself as a sportsman and a true soldier. *"Con Dios,"* he replied, with an effort.

In full view of the garrison on the Presidio walls, and with his astounded pursuers thundering at the rear, John Thurston emerged from the arroyo. He turned toward the northwest, skirting the base of the mesa. Because he was astride a good horse, he did not look back. He spurred on at the full limit of his splendid mount's speed, his somber, unwinking eyes fixed on rolling hills that were already splashed with the shadows of approaching sundown.

In this fashion grim Carrizal looked its last upon John Thurston.

* * *

At midnight, fifty-four hours later, soldiers waiting in ambush at a point on the

River known to Border men as Cattle Crossing, heard the drumming of approaching hoofbeats. A lone rider was in the lead, from the sound of it. Others pressed hard at his heels. None were in view, for only the flaming stars lighted the sleeping hills and the sluggish, glistening waters of the Rio Grande.

Excited whispers murmured down the ranks. These were silenced by the command of an officer whose voice trembled with excitement. The clicking of rifles resounded in the darkness. Those manning the acetyline field searchlight of the Border Patrol, brought down from upriver for the purpose, stood ready and waiting.

The chase had now entered the bank of the river. Three rifle shots rang out from the pursuers, two closely spaced, the third following after an interval of seconds. The agreed signal! The hunted man *was* the gringo Thurston, arch-felon and enemy of the Republic concerning whom word had been brought by fast relay riders from Carrizal. Though he had shown the cunning of the fox, the pursuers had been even more cunning. Harried relentlessly from the rear, and with flanking riders cutting off his escape to east and west, a way had been left open only to this point on the river. And here Death waited.

"Make ready," commanded the officer. "Turn the light upon him when the sentry challenges. Shoot to kill. He is El Diablo himself."

John Thurston, reeling in the saddle, his lathered mount on the verge of collapse, had no choice but to ride out his destiny to the end. Don Miguel's horse was not beneath him now. He had changed mounts twice at the point of the stolen revolver, and each change had lessened his chance of escape. Yet the sorry creature he bestrode had brought him to the home-stretch. Below was the sheen of stars on the Rio Grande. Beyond was the free soil of Texas.

Though his instinct told him that ambush awaited in the gorge, there was nothing to be done but gamble on the darkness and the blind fury of his charge to see him through. He did not hesitate. He had not eaten since his escape. He had slept two hours in a spiny thicket. The iron stamina that had survived Carrizal and the two ghastly preceding days and nights was spent at last. Flesh and blood could stand no more. He would make it through or he would not; and what of it?

"Halt!" came the sentry's challenge. *"Quien es?"*

The blinding glare of the searchlight, to John Thurston's reeling brain, had the unexpectedness of a mortal blow. He bowed his head and charged into it, sinking his spurs deep. A volley burst from the darkness. So close it was that the acrid smoke belched into his face. An impact upon his jaw, that seemed to explode to the farthest nerve and tissue of his being, sent him hurtling into more impenetrable blackness.

His own awareness ceased here. Only the soldiers of the Republic, and hidden watchers on the Texas side, saw how stubborn was the iron gringo's hold on life, how his fighting instincts battled on even into the arms of Death.

His horse, carried on by its own momentum, stumbled through the cordon. The gringo was falling, yet still clung to the saddle with convulsive grip. Both horse and man were down, at the water's edge; and the gringo struggled to hand and knee. The pitiless searchlight revealed the lower portion of his face shot away, his tattered shirt glistening and crimson.

He threshed in the water like a wounded animal. He arose, hip deep, turning himself about slowly, his hands cover-

ing his face. A volley from the darkness ripped the glistening water about him into angry shreds. He crumpled and fell, and did not rise. Swifter currents caught him and hurried him away.

The searchlight swept the dark water. They glimpsed the body once, farther out, drifting toward midstream at a whim of sluggish currents. It was motionless, face downward, riding deep.

Thus, in the annals of Carrizal and the official records dealing with enemies of the Republic, the incident of John Thurston was brought to a satisfactory close.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Doomed Men

A DOCTOR in Laredo, in the small hours, was aroused by the imperative ringing of the night bell. Before he could answer its summons, he heard the hoofbeats of an unknown rider thudding away, to die in the distance. Profound though his knowledge was of the harshness of man toward man in the frontier, the condition of the body left on his doorstep lay outside his previous experience.

Who the mutilated form there could once have been, who had deposited it there, the doctor could only vaguely guess. A fugitive, perhaps, who had escaped from some Border prison, from some man-made hell, given a helping hand by an anonymous Samaritan, who preferred, for private reasons, to keep his cloak of mystery? Probably. It was not the first of such a case which the physician had known there in that reckless Border town. But the body—for corpse it must be—was a horrible thing.

That of a man of middle age it was, well-proportioned, and of marvelous physique. The torso was emaciated now, wasted beyond belief. Upon it, so it seemed, had been inflicted all the punishment that man or nature could devise. It had been beaten, blistered, lacerated, riddled with bullets and immersed in water. Strange manacles, to which large links were still attached, encircled each ankle. A bullet had pierced the right shoulder, narrowly missing the lung. Two had passed through the left hip. Most terrible of all was the condition of the lower part of the face, where a slug had all but torn the jaw away.

And yet in this shattered hulk, a spark lived on.

Forty-eight hours later in San Antonio, in a hospital surgery, occurred an event of importance to the rapidly enlarging scientific circles of south Texas. A visiting surgeon of international fame, the originator of a hitherto undreamed—but later commonly accepted—technique in bone surgery, performed his magic for the benefit of the hospital staff and invited members of the profession.

The identity of the patient meant nothing to these moulders of human clay. Of interest only was the fact that the broken body brought down from the Border town provided the master sculptor with the identical clay he required. The manner in which the shattered jaw was built up, with segments of bone taken at apparent random from other parts of the insensible torso, were the sole and tremendous details that registered upon them.

And John Thurston, when he strode forth seven weeks later into the balmy winter sunshine of San Antonio, faced the staggering realization that in the eyes of the world—as in the eyes of the clinic and on the hospital records—he was still an unknown. He now occupied the loneliest pinnacle of his lonely career. He had lost his identity.

It was hard to realize, at first, the change that had been wrought in him. He had gained a glimpse of it in hospital mirrors, during the period of his convales-

cence. It had been obvious enough that his outward appearance had changed. His hair was gray now and short cropped; his mustache gone. His features, formerly rugged and square of outline, were bony and deeply scored with long, brooding lines. His faded, expressionless, unwinking eyes had their counterpart in a thousand old-timers whose lives had unfolded in the blistering brush country of South Texas.

Most marked of all was the change in the contour of his jaw. And the harshness of voice that had followed his first terrific taste of discipline at Carrizal. He had never before realized how slight are the physical details that distinguish one man from another. He knew himself to be John Thurston. His voice and the new set to his jaw—which altered the whole cast of his features—were those of a stranger.

There was more to it than that, as he speedily discovered when he sought out the familiar haunts of those who rode the brush. There were many such in old San Antone. As he leaned upon polished bars, listening to voices he recognized and words whose every lightest inflection and hidden meaning he thoroughly understood, he learned that in the eyes of Border adventurers, John Thurston no longer existed.

When his name was mentioned it was dismissed with a shake of the head. John Thurston had been a good man and a square shooter, it was agreed; hard-fisted; hard-boiled. One who never forgot a friend or forgave an enemy. In his last enterprise he had crowded his luck too far. His partner, Givens, had escaped from a Mex jail and made it safely back. Thurston, returning later, had been shot down before he reached the river. Thus his stormy chapter had come to a close.

It was strangely disheartening in the beginning, to listen thus to his own epitaph. As he pondered it, looking into the unmoved eyes of men who would previously have recognized him among thousands, he saw that here was a situation made to order. The world believed John Thurston to be dead. Dal, unquestionably, believed it, too. Gone forever would be the grim forebodings that must have come to him with the thought that John Thurston might one day escape from Carrizal. He would feel secure. His guards would be lowered.

Into that security, he, John Thurston, would steal like a thief in the night. Only to Dal, when he faced him in that final moment, would he make himself known. And he knew—as he had known from the first—that when he buried Dal and reared a marker over his resting-place, something within him would also die. The broken shell of him would move on. He would taste the dust of brush country trails, know heat and thirst and winter storm. A few more years would see the end, and they would bury him where he fell.

But the true John Thurston would forever remain behind. Out yonder in the brush. Beside the spot that held all that was true and fine in him, all his hopes and dreams; all that he had loved and defended so fiercely and had here destroyed by his own hand. Beside Dal's grave.

IT WAS when he began to make inquiries concerning Dal's present whereabouts that John Thurston realized how long was the trail that lay before him. Much water had flowed beneath the bridge since he and his ex-pardner had ridden south beyond the Rio. Since Dal had returned, history had been made in the brush country.

Dal had rejoined King Gillette's band immediately upon his escape from Mexico. This was easy enough to establish, through old-timers who had been in Laredo at the time. The three day brawl

that had preceded the departure of the gang was well remembered. Dal had been the most reckless and spendthrift of all. It had been presumed that Gillette had supplied the funds for this orgy, to celebrate the prodigal's return.

And where was Givens now?

The answer to this question, he discovered, was desired most earnestly by every law-enforcing agency of the Lone Star state. Dal Givens' career of crime had been brief but lurid. King Gillette, having branched out into more ambitious fields than wet cattle, smuggling and other Border traffic, had overreached himself in the matter of looting a certain brush country bank. Here, after a spectacular battle, King Gillette and most of his band had been captured. The desperadoes were now at Live Oak, awaiting trial.

Three of the outlaw's right-hand men had made their escape a month since. Two were Peters and Estes, cutthroats whom John Thurston well knew. The third was Dal Givens, who, it was rumored, had chosen to ride alone. The likeness of this trio were now posted at every crossroads and hamlet in South Texas.

All this part fact, part hearsay, made it seem that John Thurston was checkmated at the start. Trails are long in South Texas, even for those who ride openly, in daylight hours. For those who desire only to avoid the haunts of men, the trails are endless. What chance to find Dal Givens now, with the hand of the world against him and trained peace officers already ranging far and wide in the same search?

John Thurston made his preparations methodically. The remaining years of his life were available for the mission. The material rewards or hope of glory that inspired the other man-hunters were puny forces compared to the urge that drove him on. Thrice—nine times armed—he could not fail.

Because San Antonio, in that day and year, was the leading horse, hide, cattle and tallow market of South Texas, it was easy enough for John Thurston to attach himself to one of the larger firms as a horse-buyer.

His range training and knowledge of the brush country qualified him as an expert. No questions were asked concerning his past, once his authority was established. As plain John Smith, from the San Saba country, he was sent upon short excursions into the adjacent brush. The success of these missions entitled him to larger fields. And it was as Silent Smith, of McClurg & Killen, San Antonio, that he became known far and wide as a shrewd, just and uncommunicative trader.

As a known field buyer for an established San Antonio firm he was able to penetrate into remote corners of the state without arousing suspicion. Outlaws more than all others must have mounts. Breeders and owners of small *caballadas* talked a language of their own. From one of these, sometime, somewhere between the Pecos and the Colorado, he would gain a clue that would lead him to the hideout of Dal Givens.

WINTER passed. Spring stole up from the south. Briefly, in those golden days, the brush country was a-bloom. John Thurston, returning from Palestine, San Antonio bound, reached a sudden decision that caused him to stop off at Huntsville, seat of the state penitentiary.

It was a gambler's hunch, no more. Preceding months had revealed no hint of his ex-partner's whereabouts. There had been rumors in plenty. Estes and Peters had been seen here, Givens yonder. Each such clue, when run down, had led nowhere. Dal, so it seemed, had vanished from the face of the earth. Why not interview King Gillette, awaiting execution

at Huntsville, on the lone chance that the outlaw could supply him with the hint he needed?

The moment the resolve came to him, John Thurston regretted not having attempted it before. Gillette was to hang less than a week distant. If properly approached, and he knew anything of Dal, he might be willing to reveal it—only so long as Gillette did not recognize John Thurston as the one man in the former band whom the outlaw leader had been unable to dominate. He pondered for some plan up to the very gates of the prison.

Because he was able to identify himself as an agent of a responsible firm of San Antonio, John Thurston's request for an audience with the condemned man was readily granted. Many persons, seeking information concerning stolen livestock known only by Gillette, had preceded him.

The room was square, high-ceilinged, well-lighted. Two sets of grilles divided it in two. They were some six feet apart, so that nothing could secretly be passed from visitor to prisoner. Two men stood beyond the second grille. One, a guard, withdrew at the warden's gesture. The assistant warden, required to be present during the interview, sauntered to the end of the room and leaned against the wall.

John Thurston, drawing closer to the bars, found himself facing the most piercing scrutiny to which he had been subjected since he had lost his identity. It was the cold, unwinking, reptilian gaze of King Gillette.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Last Trail

IT SEEMED incredible that his ancient enemy should not recognize him. Again, as in that distant, deadly moment when they had faced each other over gun-muzzles, King Gillette's eyes were boring into his. There was no recognition in them; they were merely venomous and appraising, like those of a wounded and ensnared diamond-back whose hate of the world has persisted to the end.

"Gillette," said John Thurston, "You don't know me, but I've heard of you. I'm John Smith, from San Antonio. The boys call me Silent Smith." He lowered his voice and spoke in a whisper that barely moved his lips. "I want to talk to you about—Givens. Where is he?"

The change in the outlaw was instant. It was as though his hawk-like features had assumed a mask. He, too, lowered his voice.

"What's it to you?" countered the outlaw.

John Thurston was staggered by what he had glimpsed. Swiftly as the outlaw had raised his guard, he had seen all the malice and hate of the man furiously drawn in and concentrated at the mention of a single name. King Gillette, too, hated Dal, with a hatred second only to his own.

It was a situation undreamed. John Thurston did not hesitate to seize upon it instantly. "I've got a debt to pay to Givens," said John Thurston. "It can only be squared with lead. I've got a hunch you know where he's hiding out."

"Bah!" said Gillette, pityingly. "You've been around a little, hombre. You didn't get that face at tatting parties and quilting bees. Put your cards on the table. John Smith, eh? How do I know you ain't John Law? What you want of Givens?"

"I'll make statements and name names," said John Thurston, "that'll prove what I want, and that I'm entitled to have it. Listen close. I came up from old Monterey six months ago. I stopped in at Carrizal. I heard there was an American in the hoosegow there, so I spread a little *dinero* and got to see him. He was an old pal of mine, who I used to ride with over in the

San Saba country. His name was Thurston. Ever hear that name?"

"I have," said Gillette. Beneath lowered brows his eyes glittered like crumbs of obsidian. "Describe him."

He described himself as King Gillette had known him, in minute detail.

Gillette shook his head. "It ain't enough. Plenty of folks have seen Thurston. Everybody knew he was rotting at Carrizal, blast him! You haven't proved anything."

"Listen to this, then," said John Thurston. "You know he was always a tight-lipped hombre. When I talked to him at Carrizal, he figured he'd never make it back to Texas. His hunch was right. So he told me things. That's why I'm here. Now then, Gillette, if I tell you what he told me—things that only you and him and Givens knew—will that prove anything?"

"Let's hear 'em."

"He had a showdown with you once," said John Thurston. "It was about Givens. The rest of your gang thought the near-gunplay came up because you didn't want Thurston and Givens to break away and lone-wolf it. It was deeper than that. You knew that Thurston thought more of Givens than most men think of their sons. You knew that Thurston figured to cut Givens out of the wild bunch and make him settle down. You personally didn't give a damn about Givens. He was useful, and that was all. But through him you could strike at Thurston where it hurt the most. Is that right?"

"Go on," said Gillette; and again John Thurston felt the searching quality of his hard unfaltering stare. There was awe in his glittering eyes now, a dawning exultation that John Thurston at first could not fathom.

Then he saw—or thought he saw—the meaning of it. Gillette was gloating over the picture he had just drawn of John Thurston, his arch-enemy, at Carrizal. Broken and hopeless. Conceding defeat.

"GO ON," repeated Gillette. "You've talked to Thurston, that's plain. Wild horses couldn't have dragged it from him—and him on the losing end of it like that. So he figured Givens had double-crossed him, eh? Ate out his heart about it, rotting there at Carrizal. Died the same way, his last hope gone." He nodded. "That's fine! But where do you fit into the picture, mister?

"Wait"—he checked John Thurston with a gesture—"I've got it. You made a little agreement with Thurston. For old time's sake, you'll do a little chore for him. You'll look up Givens, give him a message from John Thurston, and leave him toes up. Is that it?"

"That's it." John Thurston eyed him unwinkingly. "Any objections?"

King Gillette did not immediately reply. He leaned against the bars, at arms length, the palm of his right hand pressed outward. His head lowered. It was an attitude of deep thought, as though he were debating a course of action.

John Thurston waited, his gaze fixed upon that out-turned palm; and as he waited, he saw the first two fingers spread away a little from the last two. Through that narrow aperture the outlaw's eyes glittered upon him, like those of a watchful rodent peering through a crack.

It was a curious gesture, yet in line with King Gillette's crafty impulses. At the moment, John Thurston classified it only as an attempt to study him unawares. It was only later that the true signifiance of what he had glimpsed came home to him.

The outlaw dropped his arm. A smile that was not good to look upon drew back his thin lips. "No objections," said he. "Only thing is, Smith, you're too late. The chore's already been attended to."

John Thurston's heart stood still.

"What do you mean?" he whispered.

"I've got a bone to pick with Givens myself," said King Gillette. "So have the boys who'll do time here for the rest of their lives. So have Peters and Estes. Why? Because Givens double-crossed us on that Live Oak deal. Just like he made a sucker out of poor old Thurston. He was rotten to the core. So Peters and Estes, after shooting their way out of Live Oak, have been looking for Givens. They couldn't find him. Just two days ago they sent a go-between here to ask me what I knew. I told 'em." His smile deepened, baring his teeth. "Blast that Givens! When I swing next week you won't hear me complain—just so I know Givens is toes up."

"What did you tell them?" said John Thurston. Only his iron self-control kept his voice from shaking. "Where is Givens?"

"What's it to you?" countered the outlaw, his gaze narrowing. "Your chore's done. Thurston's account will be squared—and mine, too—when Peters and Estes drop in on him."

"Accidents happen," said John Thurston. "I want to be sure. I want to see Givens' grave."

Gillette considered him for a space in silence. Then he shrugged his shoulders. "Why not?" he said. "I'll tell you what I know. You might get there in time for the killing, at that. It's just a hunch, no more. But I wouldn't be surprised if Givens' hideout was somewhere along the Frio."

John Thurston stared at him, teeth clenched. *Along the Frio!* In a sudden flash of realization, aghast at his own stupidity in not thinking of it before, he knew that what Gillette deemed to be a mere "hunch" was probably a literal fact. Where, with the hand of the world against him, an outcast even among wanted men, could Dal have turned for sanctuary? Where else than to the hidden homestead along the Frio?

HE KNEW, with a sudden certainty, that Dal was there. With that certainty came a sudden uprush of emotion that he had thought himself incapable of feeling. It was a revulsion from the thing to which he had dedicated his life, a shrinking from his task. They had dreamed dreams together of that homestead. All their subsequent hopes had pointed toward it, as toward the Promised Land. . . .

But that momentary weakening was thrust aside and overwhelmed by the old bitterness, the outraged memory of his wrongs. After all, there was no Dal Givens. The boy he had loved, and the desperado in hiding on the Frio, were utter strangers. He would destroy this usurper, this masquerader who had stolen into and desecrated a lonely shrine; and he would bury him there. Thus the hand would be played to the end.

"God!" John Thurston breathed. Then, "Gillette," he said, "do you reckon I could beat Peters and Estes to Givens' hideout?"

"Smith," returned the outlaw, "I've been sizing you up since we begun this parley. At first I wasn't sure you was gunning for Givens like a lad who meant business. I can see now that you're a gent who's riding to a feast. Thurston himself couldn't be more eager, and he had plenty of grudge."

"I'm taking his place," said John Thurston simply. "I'm after Givens."

"Well, then," said Gillette, "you're entitled to it. By burning up the dust direct to the Frio, you've got a chance to get there first. Peters and Estes are only two days' ride from Givens' hang-out, but they'll take their time. They'll talk it over and figure their own chances before starting out. But a gent traveling in the open

and coming fast, could ride right into the heart of it."

"Good" said Thurston. "I'll start now. Here's something I'm curious about. How did you know Givens would hide out on the Frio?"

"Just a hunch," said the outlaw. "I sneaked up behind Thurston and Givens once, when they was talking it over. I always liked to keep tabs on the boys. They were discussing a homestead just above the bend of the Frio. They mentioned pigs and chickens and such like most gents mention pearls. Yeah—even kids. Givens had a gal staked out, you savvy, down on the Nueces." His thin lip curled. "Smith, you've been around a little, probably, but you haven't had my experience. You crave a few pointers on how to handle Givens?"

"I'll be glad to hear them."

"Givens is a gun-fighter," said the outlaw. "That's one thing old Thurston taught him. So go after him with a forked stick. Down him first and talk later. I've wiped out several grudges in my time. I'll give you my system. You don't want a gent to pass out on you before he knows the what for and how come. Shoot him in the stomach, plumb center. Just above the belt buckle. That's fatal, but he dies slow, and plenty hard. Three-four hours and he's toes up. Meanwhile, you've got plenty of time to parley, and him with no choice but to listen. Perfect, ain't it?"

It was as though every ancient bullet scar in John Thurston's body—and there were many—cringed and contracted at the picture. He saw Dal Givens lying at his feet, arms clasped about his middle, his graying face pressed into the dust. Suppose, in that instant, that it *was* Dal Givens, and no stranger, whose dying convulsions he was witnessing? Where would be his vengeance then?

The thought passed. He nodded slowly. "Sounds good," he said. Awkwardly he paused, there facing the doomed man. "Thanks," he said, "and so-long."

"Adios, Smith," returned the outlaw.

Being certain beyond doubt that his search was over, John Thurston acted swiftly. At San Antonio, he tendered his resignation to McClurg & Killen, explaining that he proposed to engage henceforth in private business. Substantial commissions were due him from the firm. He directed that the major part of these funds should be turned over to a certain hospital—the institution from whose doors he had emerged a stranger.

He reserved only enough cash to purchase a ticket to Uvalde, the point nearest his destination; for one saddle horse, blankets and poncho, and for one arm-pit holster. With this equipment—friendless, penniless and alone—he had begun his career in the brush country.

He was growing old; weary of searching, of hating, of living. It was fitting that in the same manner it should be brought to a close—there on the ground that he had loved.

CHAPTER NINE

Guns Along the Frio

IT WAS at sundown, with shadows choking the arroyos and the breath of spring whispering across the high plateau, that John Thurston drew rein at the bend of the rocky trail and looked down upon the hidden valley and the drowsing homestead.

He had seen it once before, with Dal. Countless times since, in dreams, he had seen it again. It was unchanged, except that it seemed more beautiful, more serene. The moment, the mood that was upon him, the season of the year—all wrought their magic. The harsh contours of the enclosing cliffs were softer of outline at dusk. Yet, through the crystalline, wine-like air, each detail of the home-

stead itself was vividly, sharply etched.

Tranquillity and peace. At the left, past the gap, the glistening Frio slid. At the right stretched the fat bottom lands between the enclosing, horseshoe walls. Corn and sugar-cane were already green against the black soil. Flanking the low-walled cabin, barely glimpsed through towering cottonwoods, was a garden patch that bristled with stakes, and in which row on row of early vegetables were already thrusting upward. Corrals and other outbuildings were beyond. The black arms of a windmill turned slowly against the fading splendor of the painted cliffs.

Except for the murmuring of the river, it was quiet in the canyon. At this twilight hour, no song-birds called. The buzzing of insects on the high slopes was stilled. Cows stood motionless in the feedlots, ruminating placidly. Rotund hogs lay sprawled. Chickens were slow-moving fragments of white, converging slowly toward their pens, driven by the gathering shadows. On a high corral fence three turkeys sat, shoulder to shoulder.

A tranquil scene; a quiet hour. Again John Thurston felt a revulsion of feeling, an inner protest; as of one who stretches forth his hand to destroy his own treasures. Yet he did not hesitate. The trail had been long—too long.

He had timed it so that he would not arrive in the full glare of sunlight. Gillette had not recognized him, because of his altered features. But Dal might, in broad daylight. At dusk, in the shadow of his sombrero, his eyes would be hidden; and his voice was that of a stranger.

He thrust his hand inside his hickory shirt, where the button was missing, to reassure himself that his weapon was there and ready. Carefully then, searching the terrain below, he eased past the corner and so began the descent to the valley floor.

No sight or sound of human life was abroad. The homestead brooded. It was quiet—too quiet. Before he had reached the lush meadow that joined pillar to pillar of the gap, an ancient and unerring instinct told him that hidden eyes were upon him, studying his every move. He rode with careless ease, like one whose mission is ordinary and usual; but beneath his shadowed sombrero his gaze roved incessantly, seeking the source of the nameless premonition.

Thus he chanced to see, beyond the opposite pillar of the gap upriver, two saddled horses standing. They were high up on the canyon wall, hidden from view of the valley in a clump of thorn. Their outlines were barely visible in the brush. Yet he saw them clearly, in silhouette against the sky. They were motionless, their reins trailing.

His unwinking gaze turned again to the homestead before him. He was approaching at an angle across the meadow, bearing toward the front gate opening into the square of cottonwoods about the house. As his view of the barn yard and farther outbuildings widened, he saw two more saddled horses waiting. They were stationed at the side gate leading toward the barn yard. They were sweat-stained and dusty, heads hanging.

John Thurston rode on, narrowing the distance to the small front gate. He sat the saddle easily, in careless pose, just as any chance wayfarer might have approached a Texas ranch at dusk. But his thoughts ranged forth like wolves seeking a scent.

FOUR men had descended upon the homestead, just prior to his own arrival. Two were here, in the heart of this ominous quiet. Two were posted as lookouts on the heights. Peters and Estes had arrived with reenforcements, plainly enough. It was their horses that stood at the side gate. They had left their com-

panions at the gap and ridden on in. But why had he, John Thurston, been permitted to enter the gap unchallenged?

The desperadoes had just barely beaten him. They had arrived only a matter of minutes before. Though the sweat-stained animals were no longer blowing, their deep, regular breathing was proof enough of a long, sustained run just closed. If the outlaws *were* on the premises, what had delayed the shooting? They would have no cause to delay. Yet, during his own approach to the gap, no sound of gunfire had reechoed in the canyon of the Frio.

He halted at the gate, the footfalls of his mount in the lush grass all but noiseless. From this position, the barn yard and outbuildings beyond were visible only through the gaps in the cottonwoods. No challenge came from the silent cottage. Smoke arose from the low kitchen chimney. On the porch a clothes basket stood, piled high with white garments that had obviously just been taken from the lines in the adjacent garden. The front door was slightly ajar. He could see nothing through the crack but the blackness of farther shadow.

It was only briefly that he hesitated, debating his rôle as a chance wayfarer. According to Texas custom, a stranger riding in thus casually would hallo from the gate to announce his arrival. He knew that there was nothing casual in scene or moment. A sense of stress and strain, of explosive events awaiting a signal, was in the very air. It was as though the cottonwoods towering above him stood rigid and waiting.

And as he hesitated, his gaze fixed upon the door and the black, forbidding windows, his eye caught a tiny but significant motion. The door swung in a little, a matter of inches; then back. All the old hardness and poise, the sharpening of faculties that preceded a crisis, stole through his veins. No random draft of air had caused the door to waver thus. It was a signal of some sort; and it was directed at him.

He swung down, leaving the reins trailing, and pushed through the gate, mounted the steps softly. Boards of the porch creaked beneath his weight. He stood ready at the threshold, his body turned a little away.

The door opened wider. A woman's shoulder, the body prone on the floor, was pressed against its edge. He pushed in, stepping across her body, and cast a lightning glance about the room. It was empty, the comfortable furnishings looming in the shadow. A door led into the kitchen and a farther door opened upon the garden. All was empty. He turned and knelt beside the woman, looking down into her wide, horrified eyes.

She was bound, wrist to ankle, with a short dally rope. A coarse bandanna gagged her, pressing deep into her smooth, bloodless cheeks. John Thurston had seen her before. She did not recognize him. She was Dal's woman, the girl who had waited on the Nueces.

SHE made throaty sounds, mouthing the gag. He untied the knot, and with fingers to his lips commanded silence. With his own bandanna he wiped the cold perspiration of deadly fear from her forehead.

"Quiet," he warned. "Talk fast. Who's here? Where's Givens?"

"Are you a friend?" she said between her teeth.

"A friend," said John Thurston harshly.

"Quick, then," said she. "Never mind me. Run out to the blacksmith shop. They've got Dal. They're trying to make him talk. He's unarmed. Oh, he warned me so many times to watch for strangers. And I—I've failed him. . . ."

"Easy," said John Thurston. "If they're

trying to make him talk, there's time. Who took you by surprise?"

"The two terrible men that escaped from the Gillette gang. Dal's described them to me often. Peters and Estes. You're our last hope. Oh"—she rolled her head in an agony of desperation—"You can't. They've probably seen you coming. Nothing can stop them—nothing. They'll shoot you on sight. They'll—"

"But I've got a gun," he interrupted grimly. "Listen. There's two more at the gap. Who are they?"

"Two more?" The horror in her voice was her answer. She did not know. Even in stress of that crowded moment, he thrilled to her next words. Through them spoke the creed of frontier women. "Turn me loose," she begged. "Let me have the rifle there on the rack!"

"No," said John Thurston, leaping up. "Be quiet. Lie still."

He strode quickly through the kitchen. The main barn and corrals were ahead. Near at hand, at his left, were two smaller buildings. The first was an ancient cabin, with a broad stoop and bench flanking its front. It was this cabin that had caught his eye when he and Dal had inspected the homestead, long ago. From its bench, in his old bizarre dreams, he had seen Dal's children at play. The door was ajar. There was a bunk inside, neatly made up. There was a table and a rawhide-meshed rocker. . .

The blacksmith shop was just beyond. Its front was open, its interior cloaked in shadow. As he bore directly toward it, his footfalls shuffling in the ancient dust, a man stepped forth from the shadow into the open, facing toward him. Another followed, sidling a little away. Both stood on legs firmly planted, thumbs hooked in belts, the outspread fingers of their right hands resting upon the butts of their weapons.

Peters was on the left, Estes at the right. Even had John Thurston not recognized them, their pose would have told any rider of the brush country that their intent was plain. He was covered from two angles. They awaited only a sign, a clue to the newcomer's identity. And as John Thurston continued to advance—likewise tensed for the slightest false motion—he saw that he possessed an unexpected advantage.

He had taken them by surprise. The cottonwoods had shielded his approach. They had not seen him until he had emerged from the garden gate.

He halted before them, some fifteen paces distant.

HE COULD not see Dal, because of the angle of the shop wall, and he dared not advance farther. He pushed back his sombrero, so that his face was revealed in the best light. His eyes remained shadowed. Like one ill at ease, his hand, dropping, fumbled at his hickory shirt, where the button was missing.

"I'm Smith," he said. "From San Antone. Horse buyer for McClurg and Killen."

"Smith, eh?" said Peters. "Well, Smith, you're not welcome here. We've no horses to sell. Make dust." And his head lowered a little, like a bull braced for the charge.

Estes—dark, hawk-faced, thin-lipped—stood silent. He was, John Thurston knew, by far the most dangerous of the reckless pair. It was Estes that he watched, while addressing the shaggy, blond Peters.

"I'm not interested entirely in horses," he said in harsh, unemotional tones. "For five months I've been looking for Givens. I talked to King Gillette at Huntsville. He told me he was probably hiding out here."

"What you want of Givens?"

"I used to know John Thurston. We

were boys together. I saw him at Carrizal, just before he made the break and the Mex troops downed him at the Rio. He gave me a message to deliver. As I understand it, he and Givens were pardners once."

"What message?" demanded a voice from the interior of the blacksmith shop.

It was a voice to which John Thurston thrilled to the uttermost parts of his being. Dal Givens lurched forth into the open and stood, swaying. He was naked to the waist; and a great red welt, like a fresh burn, lay across his chest. His hands were bound behind him. His tawny hair hung in a mane over his eyes.

"You lie, Smith," came Estes' cool, incisive tones. "You're not looking for Givens. You're a Ranger; and you're looking for us. Ranger"—his voice rose, hardened—"you've found us!"

"Wait," said Dal. He lurched another step forward, so that he stood between the two outlaws. Through his mane-like hair he looked hard at John Thurston. No recognition was in his eyes, yet his look was piercing, significant. "Wait," he said. "I want that message. We'll soon prove his story. Smith, when you talked to Thurston, did he tell you how I escaped from Carrizal?"

Frail indeed was the thread holding locked forces in check. It was enduring only from second to second. John Thurston was conscious of but two things in that taut and straining interval. First, that Dal was leading up to something that would affect the imminent showdown. Second, that rage toward these two desperados who had placed a hot iron against flesh he once had loved, was rising within him like a slow, smoldering tide. He fought against this rage. He would need all his resources unhampered when the showdown came.

"Yes," he said. "He told me all about it. Are you Givens?"

"I'm Givens. Let's hear about that escape. It'll prove you talked to him."

"You were at one end of the line of prisoners," said John Thurston harshly. "He was at the other. When you made the break he tripped up the guard. Then, while everybody—"

"Wait," cut in Dal. "Let's get this straight. Thurston's hands were shackled. Still he was able to trip up one of his guards. Is that it?"

Even as he nodded, John Thurston grasped his ex-pardner's intent. Dal's hands too, were shackled. He appeared to sway drunkenly. He was, in fact, sidling little by little toward Peters, who was at his right.

"That's it. And—"

"And that's enough, Smith," came Estes' voice, hard and dominant. "Your hand's played out. We gave you a chance. Now—"

HIS outspread hand stabbed at his gun like the flash of a whip. John Thurston leaped to the right, drew and fired in the same motion. Dal hurled his body forward and down. Peters crashed to earth with him, his weapon exploding toward the sky.

It was over in an instant. The tide of battle was already turned. Estes lay sprawled, face down in the dust. Peters leaped up like a wounded grizzly. With a tremendous contortion, Dal's legs entangled him again; and again he fell. This time, he did not rise. John Thurston's foot was upon the wrist of his gun arm and his gun against his chest.

"It's all over, Peters. Let go your gun."

John Thurston kicked the gun out of reach and helped Dal to his feet. He kept his unwinking gaze on the outlaw while he untied his ex-pardner's hands.

Peters sat up. His teeth were bared, his florid features all but purple with wrath. "Blast you!" he grated. "You *were* a Ranger, eh?"

"Get Estes' gun," John Thurston told Dal. "I only winged him. No, Peters, I'm no Ranger. Smith is the name—from San Antone."

Hoofbeats drummed across the meadow. John Thurston had temporarily forgotten the two at the gap. Aroused by the gunfire, they came at an extended run.

"Get set," Thurston told Dal. "Here's two more."

"No," said Dal, peering from beneath a shading hand. "You may not be a Ranger, Mr. Smith, but these lads are. I know 'em. They're from Hildebrand's troop. See 'em ride!"

John Thurston's heart sank. He had prepared himself, in imagination, for all else but this—that the law itself should cheat him of his prey. Dal, like Peters and Estes, was a wanted man. A life sentence behind bars at Huntsville, was not enough. The fate of Dal Givens belonged to no court of law, but to him—John Thurston. It had been so decreed.

He looked at Dal, torn by terrific indecision. There was time yet, even in the presence of the Rangers, for what he had sworn to do. His gun was in his hand. Dal's belt buckle gleamed in the half light—the target pointed out to him by King Gillette.

He raised his tortured eyes to Dal's face. What he saw there caused him to hesitate. Hesitating, his chance was lost.

For Dal—incredibly—revealed no fear at the approach of the Rangers. On the contrary he seemed uplifted and exalted.

"Lawsy—*lawsy!*" he chortled, with the boyish exuberance John Thurston knew of old. "It's perfect, Smith! The last of the Gillette crew. The slate's clean!"

CHAPTER TEN

"When a Gringo Dies—"

IN THAT day Rangers whose stamping grounds included the Nueces and the Frio were long on action and short on words. They slid to a stop before the blacksmith shop and were afoot in the same motion. They were seasoned youths, their saddle-tanned features granite-like and expressionless.

The quizzical glance of the leader surveyed the situation briefly. Both dragged forth handcuffs. One manacled Peters without a word. The other stirred Estes with his toe. When the fallen outlaw groaned loudly he was likewise shackled.

"Peters and Estes," said the leader, straightening up. "A good haul. You're Givens, eh?" His glance bored into John Thurston. "Who's this?"

"Smith," said Dal, gleefully. "From San Antone. A friend of mine."

The Ranger nodded. He and his companion drew forth the makings and rolled cigarettes. They surveyed Dal, eyes twinkling, their glance inspecting his chest. "Used an iron on you, eh? How come?"

"They figured I knew where Gillette had salted some of his loot," said Dal, with a rueful grin. "I was stalling for time. They had just about decided to leave me toes up when Smith, here, strolled into the picture." He beamed upon John Thurston. "Thank Heaven for the Smiths! They're the backbone of Texas."

John Thurston was all at sea. The attitude of the Rangers toward Dal was mystery. He spoke to his ex-pardner unemotionally. "Your woman's still tied up in yonder."

Dal dashed away, heading for the house. "Bring some bandages with you," one of the Rangers called after him. "We've got to put this Estes citizen in shape to travel."

Left alone with the peace officers, John Thurston prepared to question them swiftly. On the instant, he decided against it. As Givens' "friend" he himself would be presumed to know all. Why the Rangers appeared to be friendly toward Dal made no difference in any event. Of major

and sole importance was the obvious fact that they did not intend to take him prisoner; that they proposed to leave him behind. Which was all that he, John Thurston, needed.

He remained silent, therefore, and drew forth the makings. The three cigarettes glowed in the deepening gloom. Peters sat hunched, his shaggy head sullenly lowered. Estes turned on his back and groaned again. "I'm done for, boys," said he. "I'm bleeding bad."

"It's just your shoulder, Estes," said the leader of the Rangers. "We'll plug it and help you into the saddle. You're riding downriver with us tonight." To his companion he said: "Strip his shoulder. Here comes Givens and his woman. Good —she's bringing hot water and bandages."

Dal brought a lantern from the blacksmith shop. John Thurston helped to bathe and bandage the outlaw's wound. Then, belatedly, as all stood in the lantern's glow, the leader of the Rangers explained their presence.

"We've been on the trail of these lads for seven weeks," said he. "We followed them down the Frio today. We didn't know this was your hideout, Givens. We heard that a nester named Calhoun had bought it six months or so ago. We figured to drop in and look over this said Calhoun, when we got around to it."

"I'm Calhoun," said Dal. He grinned. "Hereafter, it's Givens."

"We knew it was a hole in the wall," said the Ranger. "When Peters and Estes turned in here we knew they'd have to come out again. So we waited at the gap. When the shooting started, we came hell-bent."

"Smith," began the other Ranger, curiously, "and—by the way—*what* Smith?"

"HORSE buyer," said John Thurston. "McClurg and Killen, San Antonio."

"I've heard of you." The other nodded. "I didn't know you were a gun-fighter. Tell me, Smith, how in blazes did you down this pilgrim? These lads are gun-throwers themselves."

"Givens did it," said John Thurston. "His hands were tied, but he kicked Peters' legs out from under him regardless. Meanwhile, I downed Estes. He tripped up Peters again, and it was all over."

"Don't give me the credit," protested Dal. "It was the same play John Thurston and I made at Carrizal. Thurston himself couldn't have thrown a gun quicker than you did on Estes."

The leader of the Rangers threw down his cigarette and ground it underfoot. "Split the reward money between you," said he. "A thousand apiece. It makes no difference to the Association who gets it. Point is, the Gillette gang has been stamped out, which shorely takes a load off our shoulders! Well, folks, we'll mosey along. R'ar up on your hind legs, Peters."

"You can't do that," protested the girl, with the outraged hospitality of the South. "It's long past supper time. As soon as I get the biscuits into the oven, we'll be ready to eat."

"Sorry, ma'am," said the Ranger. "And thank you kindly. But we got to get downriver. Some of the boys are working up this way. They're entitled to know pronto that Peters and Estes have come home to roost."

"You'll stay, at least, Mr. Smith?"

"Will he?" said Dal, with feeling. "He shorely will. He was kids with John Thurston. What we got to talk about will take all night."

John Thurston merely inclined his head politely. He, too, had much to discuss with Dal Givens.

After peace officers and prisoners faded into the deepening gloom, Dal said, "I'll put your horse away, Mr. Smith." He

added—all unconscious that the thing he was suggesting had once meant the ultimate goal of life to John Thurston—"Set yonder on the stoop. I'll be with you in a jiffy."

"Don't you folks plan to set and talk too long," warned the girl, hurrying toward the house. "Supper's 'most ready."

John Thurston seated himself on the edge of the stoop. He could bring himself to go no farther, though the battle-scarred bench beckoned in the gloom. The bench was not for him. Only in dreams had he sat upon it in just such dusk as this. Not even in dreams could he sit there again.

Methodically, he drew forth his gun, ejected the empty cartridge and slid another home. He returned the gun to its hidden holster. Thereafter he merely waited.

It was quiet in the canyon. Upon the night air was the smell of the meadows, of the rich earth, the homely and familiar odors of cattle, of hogs and horses. There was also, on the wine-like tides rolling down from the mesa, a suggestion of wind-blown flowers, of the far, whispering, wistful fragrance of spring on the high plateau.

It seemed to John Thurston, as he waited, that all the beauty and promise of life had been reserved and concentrated, by his destiny and Dal's, to this one night. Here was a homestead, matchless and complete. Yonder was a woman, singing at her task. These things were Dal's. For him, the dead past had buried its dead. The fat years beckoned. Was *this* the picture, the fabric, that he, John Thurston, had been foredoomed to destroy? *Could* he destroy it, when the moment came?

He did not know. Now that each inexorable second was bringing him closer to the crossroads, it was as though two forces, each unyielding, were at death-grips within him—his love and his hate of Dal. He had thought the one to have died long since. He had fed the fires of the other through bitter months. Both roared against each other now, squarely met.

He gave no outward hint of warring emotions. He merely sat, elbows resting on his knees, waiting.

Dal Givens came, whistling. He set the lantern on the stoop, between them and a little to the rear. He seated himself with his back to a post, drew up his legs and relaxed with a sigh. He ran his fingers through his hair with a boyish gesture and beamed upon John Thurston.

"Smith," said Dal, sobering. "What was that message from John Thurston?"

"Tell me first," said the older man, "what you meant when you said 'The slate's clean?' "

"It's a long story," Dal objected.

"Let's hear it," said John Thurston grimly. "There's plenty of time."

DAL drew forth the makings with an unconscious gesture and rolled a cigarette. He looked away, above the cottonwoods and the towering cliff, to the remote stars.

"You talked to John Thurston," said Dal. "He probably told you how we got into the jackpot down yonder. And the deal with Don Miguel whereby I was to escape. You're familiar with all this, eh?"

"Yes," said John Thurston.

"Well," said Dal, puffing slowly. "Thurston wasn't much of a hand to discuss personal affairs. Even with an old pal like you. He didn't tell you about his tie-up with Gillette and his gang? I mean, as regards him and me and Gillette?"

John Thurston pondered this before replying. It was best, he decided in the end, to plead ignorance and thus get Dal's own point of view on the whole picture.

"He told me a little," he replied. "Not much. What was the tie-up?"

It was here, for the first time, that Dal Givens spoke out of character—out of line with his actions since escaping from Carrizal. It might have been the old Dal Givens speaking, the boy with whom he had crossed the Rio.

"King Gillette," said Dal, "is and was the lowest snake that ever struck without rattling. John Thurston was just as hard, but clean. He never touched a dirty job while traveling with Gillette; and Gillette couldn't make him. Thurston drew his own line and abided by it. Gillette hated his shadow. When I joined up with them, though I didn't know it, it was a battle between them from the start. Over me. Gillette wanted to see me branded at the beginning. Thurston figured to cut me out of the Wild Bunch before it was too late. Got the picture?"

"Got it," said John Thurston, harshly. He could not have stated it more simply himself. All the ancient hurt, the memory of his wrongs, returned like a sullen tide. Dal had realized all this, and *still* had followed his chosen trail?

"Well," said Dal, "when I decided to trail with Thurston, Gillette never forgot it. I didn't count, you savvy. His grudge was against Thurston. If Thurston had taken a fancy to a horse instead of me, Gillette would have sneaked up and crippled the horse on a dark night. So he laid low. When I came back from Carrizal, Gillette and his gang were in hiding outside of Laredo. I didn't know that. I didn't care. I was pointing at just one thing—to dig up gold we had cached away, and fog back to Carrizal as fast as horseflesh could carry me.

"And what do you reckon happened when I got the dinero dug up and was squatting there counting it and stowing it away?" His cigarette glowed. "Gillette had staged it perfectly. He'd figured what was afoot. He'd set two of his boys —I've always felt that one of them was Estes—on my trail. They surprised me there in the arroyo. They were masked. I was unarmed, just like I'd come from Carrizal. They slugged me, took the gold and rode away from there."

John Thurston stared at him, jaw set. Dal turned his head to look at him; and his cigarette hung motionless from his lip. Their gaze locked and held. With a sudden motion, Dal leaned forward and raised the sombrero from John Thurston's head. He snatched up the lantern and held it close.

John Thurston did not start, or evince surprise. He lowered his brows until his eyes were the merest slits.

"What is it, Givens?" he asked harshly.

As though the sound of his voice had broken a spell, the younger man slumped again. He set the lantern down and returned the sombrero. His boyish features had suddenly grown pale. A flush of embarrassment rose over them now, to the roots of his tawny hair.

"Excuse it," he muttered, haltingly. "Just for a minute—something about the eyes—the way you looked at me—dammit, I thought you were Thurston!" He brushed his own eyes with the back of his hand. "I'm loco, I guess. John Thurston's dead. But time after time I've seen him, riding in. They'd get here, and it was someone else. Just a while ago, when you were facing Peters and Estes—something about the way you stood—I thought you were John Thurston—come home at last!" His voice shook. He looked away again, at the high stars. "It isn't right. It isn't right, Smith! He shouldn't have passed out like that. He should have waited for me. It was hard, but he should have waited. I was coming. It took time. I had to raise the money. But I was coming as fast as I could. Dammit, man, he was my pardner!" He buried his face in his hands. "But—he didn't—wait."

IT WAS quiet in the gloom. The lantern sputtered wanly. A rectangle of radiance leaped up beyond the cottonwoods. Dal's woman stood framed in the kitchen doorway.

"Come and get it, folks," she called.

"Hold it," returned Dal, hoarsely. "Hold it up a couple minutes, Myry. We'll be coming. Keep the coffee hot."

Night swooped in again as the door closed. Moths fluttered about the lantern. John Thurston replaced his sombrero and pulled it low over his eyes.

"Go on," said he. "They took the gold. They slugged you and left you lay. What then?"

"When I came to, they were gone," said Dal, breathing heavily. "It was early morning. I lay there till noon, thinking it over. If I'd had a gun, I'd have blown my brains out. Always before, you savvy, Thurston had borne the load. Now it was up to me. For the first time he was banking on me. And I had failed. The gold was gone. I couldn't borrow that amount; I couldn't earn it; I couldn't steal it. If anything happened to me, Thurston was sunk. If I delayed, he was sunk. You know what I mean, Smith. *You've* seen Carrizal.

"There was nothing to do. At noon I rose up, wild-eyed. There was one play left. No use to accuse King Gillette. I *knew*—but I had no proof. No use to try to extract the money from him. What he got his clutches on, he kept. But I could get me a gun. I could face Gillette. His eyes are close together but I could place a bullet between 'em, dead center. His gang would down me; and what of it? I owed that much to John Thurston.

"So I caught my horse and started back to Laredo. On the way, a gent overhauled me and rode alongside. It was Hildebrand. He said to me—"

"Wait," cut in John Thurston. "Captain Hildebrand? Of the Rangers?"

"The same," Dal nodded. "Know him?"

"I've heard of him," said John Thurston. "Go on, son."

"He said to me: 'Where've you been, Givens? Where's Thurston? I've been looking for you.'

"'What's it to you?' I came back at him, desperate. I knew Hildebrand had nothing on me. At the minute I'd have tangled with a buzz-saw, sight unseen.

"But he looked at me in a kindly way. 'Don't go off half-cocked, lad,' he said. 'I talked to Thurston a while back. He told me he was cutting you out of Gillette's herd. That ammunition-running deal doesn't interest the Rangers,' he said. 'It's a tick in the Mex government's hide, not the commonwealth of Texas. Point is, Thurston told me you were cutting loose from Gillette. You were going straight. You aimed to settle down. How come, then, I find you burning up the dust thisaway, with blood in your eye?'

"Well, sir, I told him. I gave him the whole picture. Was there any objection from the Rangers, I wanted to know, if I eased the lad across the Jordan who'd been a thorn in the side of the Rangers for ten years past? The same being King Gillette?

"Hildebrand didn't say anything for a spell. All the while we were getting closer to Laredo. When he talked, he took my breath away. He pulled up short and motioned me to do the same. He looked me in the eye and said: "'Givens,' he said, 'I only know you by sight. But I *do* know John Thurston. His word's his bond and he knows beef on the hoof. He said you were a lad to be trusted, that you were clean strain. Give me your hand on it that you'll shoot square with me, and I'll show you how to save your pardner, wipe out King Gillette and clear your record with the commonwealth of Texas—and all in

one play. It's a tough chore,' he said, 'but I think it's in you.'

" 'Name it,' I said. 'And here's my hand on it.'

" 'Here's the play,' said Hildebrand. 'Gillette's branched out since you and Thurston quit him. He's blazing trails, but he's keeping the trails covered. Last week the Association raised a secret pool of five thousand. The bankers anted another thousand. This pot goes to the lad who can gain Gillette's confidence and engineer a deal that will bring in Gillette and his crew in one sweep. He's been slippery as a snake thus far. He's got to be caught red-handed, with evidence to convict. Beginning to get the picture, Givens?'

" 'The dust's thinning,' I agreed. 'But you're not talking to me, Hildebrand. While I'm gunning for Gillette, Thurston's rotting at Carrizal.'

" 'But not for long,' he comes back at me. 'Listen close, Givens. Here's how the cards fall. I swear you in as a Ranger. You ride in to town alone. You go straight to the Cattleman's National. Ask for Mr. Sloan. He'll place a thousand to your credit. Draw plenty. Fill your pockets with cash. Find a greaser and give him fifty, gold, to take a message to Thurston. Tell Thurston to sit tight, to hang on. It won't be long. Fifty more to the greaser when he gets back and proves he's delivered the message. Then go to Gillette. Tell him your story, just as you've told it to me. *Only* —don't let him know that you suspect his gang of taking your gold.

" 'And what will Gillette do, Givens?' says Hildebrand. 'You know the crooked snake. You know how he hates Thurston. His own crookedness will put him in your hands. He'll pat you on the back. He'll tell you not to feel bad. "To blazes with Thurston," he'll say. "Forget him. Let him rot in Carrizal. Trail with me, Givens," Gillette'll say. "Forget that penny-ante jackpot you lost. There's plenty more. It grows on bushes."

" 'You'll listen to this, Givens,' says Hildebrand. 'You'll protest at first. Then, after a few drinks, you'll weaken. Finally, you're convinced. To hell with Thurston! Make it good. Make it a good spree. Two-three days. Then, as soon as you can bring it about, show Gillette an easy deal. A certain brush country bank you know about. We'll give you those details later. The time and place. When the job's done, the six thousand's yours. Listens good?'

"Well, sir"—Dal's cigarette glowed—"It listened good, Smith. When I rode into Laredo I was a member of Troop K, Texas Rangers. A greaser started out that night for Carrizal. He never came back. Some of Zorillo's men caught him and made a revolutionist out of him, whether or no. I found that out, when I sent the second man—"

"You sent—*again?*" said Thurston.

DAL nodded. "The second man reached Don Miguel. Don Miguel sent back word to me. It was some garbled when I got it. It was to the effect that he'd believe in gringo faith when he saw gringo gold. And not before. I was right in the thick of the Live Oak deal then. I hurried it through. The minute the Gillette gang was taken I took five thousand gold and started for Carrizal."

He looked away, toward the high stars, and cleared his throat. "I was too late, Smith. He'd made his escape. He'd made it to the River. They shot him down there —within sight of Texas. I talked to Mex troopers who saw him die. It didn't mean anything to them. It meant plenty to me, Smith! They told me about it. They ended it up like they always do, even when a gringo dies. You know how it goes." He crossed himself, shrugging his shoulders—" *'Vaya con Dios.'* "

"Con Dios," murmured John Thurston.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Score Is Settled

AGAIN the rectangle of light, more vivid now because of the darkness, lay across the garden. Dal's woman looked toward them, shading her eyes. Dal ground his cigarette beneath his heel. "Reckon we'd best eat. Otherwise we get scalped."

John Thurston did not move. "Wait, son. Another minute or two, if you can hold her off."

Dal called: "Be with you in a second, honey. It won't be long."

"Land sakes!" she returned with mock severity. "It better not be. I never saw such men-folks! The biscuits won't be fit to eat."

"That's what I meant when I said: 'The slate's clean,' " said Dal. "Hildebrand told me to drop entirely out of sight, while Estes and Peters were still at large. Let folks think I was wanted, too. So I married my woman, bought this homestead and holed in. She's a good girl. It's fine land. It's a nice layout."

"Yes," said John Thurston quietly. "It's a nice layout."

"There's only one thing that makes it tough," said Dal. "I wish Thurston was here. He saw this place once. He never talked much but I know he dreamed about it plenty. On my account, you savvy. He was always thinking of me—he didn't count. I never asked him how he got started with the Wild Bunch. He never told me. There was probably a woman in it. I think he figured to set here and get his happiness second hand, if you get what I mean. This shack took his eye. It suited him fine."

"Nice shack," said John Thurston.

"And you know what, Smith? It sounds funny, maybe. On the other hand, you were pals with John Thurston once. We fixed up the shack, me and Myry. She keeps it swept and the bunk made up. She even put curtains on the windows. Nobody ever sleeps here. We like to think sometimes, in the cool of the evening, that *he's* come back. Setting on the bench, yonder. Whittling, maybe. Taking his ease."

John Thurston had ever been a stolid man, his emotions running deep. Even now, as he faced ultimate truths, he was outwardly unmoved. His eyes were hidden in the shadow of his sombrero. His deeply scored features were a mask. He sat, hands folded. He merely breathed slowly, deeply, as he fought in the lonely depths of him for strength to meet this incredible and matchless moment.

It could not be. Yet it was true; and how long—how long the trail had been!

From the walls of Carrizal, through the dark waters of the Rio, through deeps of torture and bleakness of soul his destiny had driven him on. It was not the destiny in which he had believed so implicitly. Not the false rewards of hate had waited at the end of the trail. The reality was as far removed as light from darkness, as the scorching desert is removed from the freshness and greenness of a grassy bank, beside a shining river. All the while Dal had kept faith. All the while he, John Thurston, had been heading home!

Even King Gillette, in the final showdown, had aided him. The meaning of the outlaw's strange gesture, when he had peered, rodent-like, through stealthily spread fingers, was now plain. In this fashion, seeing only the eyes of the man before him, Gillette had recognized John Thurston. Into his twisted and unscrupulous mind had leaped an instant and delightful picture: of John Thurston—unaware that Dal Givens had kept faith—destroying the one he loved, by his own hand. He had gone to the gallows believing that this had been accomplished, that he, Gillette, had won on the last play.

Instead, he had lost. By his own act he had returned to John Thurston the treasures he had snatched away. Thus the inscrutable design had been woven to the end.

DAL cleared his throat apologetically. "We'll shorely get scalped," said he, "'less we go in and eat. First, though, what was that message from John Thurston? You don't have to tone it down," he encouraged. "He couldn't help but figure I done him dirt. Somehow or another, I've got a hunch he knows better now."

"Yes," came the reply. Harsh though the voice was, the words were singularly gentle. "He knows better now. I didn't aim to sneak up on you like this, Dal. It was the way the cards fell. My name isn't Smith. There's no message except this: I've been looking for you. I figured you'd been delayed. I'm glad to see you again, son." He stated it simply, his eyes on Dal's face. "I'm John Thurston."

Dal stared at him fixedly, almost fiercely. It was as though the very walls waited, unsmiling and intent.

"When you made your break at Carrizal, a guard clubbed me across the throat," said John Thurston. "It ruined my voice. I didn't cash in at the Rio. Some lads along the Texas side fished me out, and a doctor whittled me out a new jaw, down at San Antone."

Still Dal stared at him, teeth set, motionless as though carved from stone. John Thurston took up the lantern, raised the glass and blew out the flame. He drew forth his six-shooter and laid it across his knee. He fumbled in his jeans for his pocket-knife.

"Listen, son." Through the engulfing darkness a tiny sound smote. It was a metallic sound, clear and ringing. Two short intervals. Two long. Two short. . .

The frail echoes died. Yet they seemed to roll on and on, across bleak months and miles. In just that fashion, at Carrizal, they had signaled each to each, reaffirming their trust.

"Lawsy!" breathed Dal, leaping up. "You *are* John Thurston!"

John Thurston likewise rose up. Their groping hands met, gripped hard, fell away.

And that was all. Words meant nothing at such a moment. Neither spoke.

A horse nickered softly in the gloom. Chickens muttered from their roosts. The windmill creaked. Myry, Dal's woman, was singing in the kitchen. The words were meaningless; the crooning refrain breathed of youth and hope, of simple and homely treasures, of the peace and tranquillity that strides ahead on a Texas homestead, in the hush of dusk.

Over his shoulder, presently, Dal called: "Coming, Myry. Yeah—pronto."

To John Thurston he said, as they pushed through the gate and strode side by side through the whispering garden: "After we eat, I'll fetch down your bedroll and put it in the shack."

"Much obliged," said John Thurston.

THE END

Gunless Gunman

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The Wrath of Deacon Bottle

By Robert E. Mahaffay

(Author of "The Deacon Passes Sentence," etc.)

Only one man had ever successfully framed Deacon Bottle...and that man, the Deacon vowed, would die swiftly, of his own cunning!

MOONLIGHT kindled a tiny spark along the barrel of Deacon Bottle's silver-mounted six-gun. He held the weapon loosely across his knee while his narrowed eyes strove to pick out figures in the gloom ahead. Somewhere in that mass of shadow where the road clambered around the rim of the hill,

a man was lurking silently. And the Deacon was waiting for two others to join him.

The Deacon shifted his rotund frame into a more bearable position. His ponderous limbs, comfortable only when draped over his private chair in the Desert Eagle Saloon, were aching from continued contact with the uneven ground.

A fool's errand, this that he had come on, he told himself. A soft heart was making him credulous. The man Hichens, in all probability, deserved the mess he had gotten himself into. Or perhaps, for some mysterious purpose of his own, Hichens had been lying.

Deacon Bottle groaned again, but in the midst of it, as if in answer, came the faint crunch of horses' hoofs along the road beyond the shoulder of the hill. The Deacon drew himself up to his knees. Gripping the gun more tightly, he parted the screen of sage with his left hand.

Then Hichens had not lied. The other two men were coming on their sinister errand.

It was the day before that Deacon Bottle had met the man who called himself Hichens in Latigo. Hichens of the narrow, brutally-lined face and the partially clubbed foot. He had drawn the Deacon aside into a corner of the Desert Eagle and there unfolded a tale of his plight and made his appeal for the Deacon's aid.

As the hoofbeats drummed more clearly, Deacon Bottle's mind fled swiftly over the highlights of that conversation.

Bending earnestly over the table Hichens had said: "I ain't a saint, Deacon; you can see that. I've killed when I had to, an' stole when I could. But I ain't up to cold-blooded murder, Deacon. Not that."

"Whose murder?" Deacon Bottle had asked quietly.

The man's hand had lifted in a gesture of helplessness—or had it been cunning?

"It don't matter whose, if it don't come off. It's this way, Deacon. I got a letter. My wife's in trouble down in Wyoming. There's two gents I been running with here. I don't need to tell you what we been doing. You can guess. But I want to get out of it, Deacon. They're going in for big stuff, and I want to break away. I want to go straight."

Deacon Bottle had shrugged. "Then do it."

"But I can't. Tomorrow night there's a big job planned. I can't run out on 'em or they'd think I'd queered things. They'd follow me. I got to meet 'em, tell 'em I'm pulling out."

"So what?" Deacon Bottle had prompted.

"I think they'll kill me rather than let me go. I know more'n is healthy for 'em. But if I had somebody could give me a hand if I needed it, maybe . . . ."

All of it had been unsavory to the Deacon—Hichens' narrow, evil face, the trouble he was in, the solution he proposed. "It's not a thing for me to mix in," he had countered uncomfortably.

A certain anger had flushed over Hichens' unpleasant features. "Oh, ain't it? Afraid to touch a man in the gutter for fear of getting dirty, Deacon? Afraid to help a man when there may be an ounce of lead for your pains? It's easy enough to say 'Go straight' to a man, but how's he to do it if somebody don't give him a leg up?"

And so in the end, against his will and his judgment, Deacon Bottle had promised.

AND as he knelt, watching for mounted figures to loom over the hill rim, the Deacon knew that he would have agreed to help even if Hichens had not made that last desperate appeal. It was the Deacon's old weakness. Meddling in other

people's affairs when some weaker or more helpless creature was threatened.

Perhaps, however, it was that same weakness which made Latigo tolerant regarding the suspicions which it harbored against him. For it was generally considered—though no proof was available—that most of Deacon Bottle's activities were considerably more unlawful than the preachments which he was accustomed to deliver. More than one breach of the law in and about Latigo was laid unofficially at the Deacon's door.

He was jerked sharply from his reverie by the sight of the head and shoulders of two figures mounting against the skyline as their horses jogged over the rim. In the moonlight they were but vague and faintly limned.

His eyes jerked to the left as a sliding of rocks and gravel testified that Hichens was riding out to meet the two.

A man's voice called, "Well?" The two stopped.

Then Hichens had blended with them into a single murky base from which sprang three upright figures. There was an exchange of words, too low for the Deacon to catch. And without provocation the murky base boiled into turmoil. Leather snapped, hoofs grated sharply on stone. The three horses were milling. A downward-striking ray of moonlight glittered momentarily on metal.

A voice, Hichens' this time, cried out, "For God's sake, don't shoot me!" and one of the horses burst clear for an instant from the melée.

Hichens shouted again, in a high-pitched tone of terror, and Deacon Bottle's six-gun drove a shot through a slit of flame at one of the two figures.

The man he had aimed at slumped forward across his mount's withers and disappeared from sight.

The Deacon's thumb was easing back the hammer for a second shot when his hand suddenly went limp. The blood ceased pumping in his veins as if chilled fingers were clamped around his heart.

The second horse was pitching; the rider's hat had whipped away, and in the moonlight a flood of golden hair showered down about her shoulders.

"A girl!" The words came in a choking gasp from the Deacon's constricted throat. He struggled up from his knees, dropping the gun as if it had become molten, trying to call out.

Too late, his ears picked up the warning sound of a moving body behind him. Deacon Bottle, with a vain summoning of the lithe energy which was his, had half turned when a blinding weight crushed down against his skull. Sight and thought fled from him; resistance drained out of his body, and he pitched forward to the ground.

THE burning sun had completed half its climb into the cool blue of the heavens when Deacon Bottle jogged back into Latigo. He had awakened with a torturing ache in the back of his head and a mounting anger surging in his heart. He had been duped, he knew, by the wily Hichens. But for what reason? A search of the ground there on the shoulder of the hill had revealed nothing. There was a spatter of blood staining the rock and the undergrowth; there was a welter of hoofmarks, but nothing more. His own rawboned and angular mount had not been molested.

It was the first time that the Deacon had been betrayed by that excusable weakness of his, and as he swayed to the jerk of the saddle he muttered imprecations against it.

In front of the Desert Eagle he swung wearily down, gingerly adjusting his Stetson in an attempt to conceal the lump which had swollen on his throbbing cranium.

The attempt was but partially successful. Mel Haycort, lifelong friend of the Deacon's, was at the bar, appraising a glass of whisky preparatory to downing it. He eyed the Deacon and chuckled. "What happened to you, Deacon? You look like somebody'd hit you over the head with something, an' you hadn't forgot about it."

Deacon Bottle's plump features grew sternly solemn. "I been wrestling with the devil, Mel."

"Hm. I'd say offhand he made a pretty good scrap of it."

The Deacon airily waved a hand at the bartender. "It's not a thing to be spoken of lightly, Mel. There's little enough of it done around here." Inwardly the Deacon was seething.

Haycort, with the divining shrewdness of an old acquaintance, changed his tack. "You've heard the news, I reckon?"

"News? What news?"

"'Bout young Clint Bailey. Seems he got himself shot up last night."

The Deacon examined his glass carefully. "Shot up, eh? How'd it happen?"

"Nobody knows rightly. According to his story he was ambling along half a dozen miles south of here when a gent stopped him. Pulled a gun. Kicked his horse so that they all got tangled up, and then another gent who'd been hiding in the brush up and plugged him. Drilled his shoulder."

"'All got tangled up'?" probed the Deacon. "Who do you mean, 'all'?"

"That's the funny part of it. Seems that Clint had taken Marj Brier to a dance. With old Mike Brier hating Clint's insides the way he does, Marj slipped out to go with him. Brier and Clint never have got along, you know, since that water trouble. Well, Mike didn't even know Marj had left the ranch till she lugged in Clint half dead over his saddle, an' then he pretty near tore off the roof. Swore if he ever caught Clint with his daughter again he'd do a real job of the gun work. Clint blew off a little, too, I reckon, an' told Brier he was a backward old fossil with more roar than teeth. Must've been a right hell-bellering party. Clint only stayed long enough to get the hole sponged out an' then left for home, cussing, everybody being sore as hell at everybody else. Clint come in to see the doc this morning and the story got around."

"Too bad," agreed Deacon Bottle. "And all on account of somebody throwing a stray slug last night."

"Yeah. Damned if I can figure it out. Don't seem to be no reason for it. . . ."

He broke off. A man had approached the bar and was tapping at the Deacon's arm.

"Payton Wells wants to see yuh," advised the newcomer. "Over at his office."

Deacon Bottle frowned. "What makes him think I'll jump when he sends out a call?"

The man shrugged. "I ain't good at riddles. But he said you'd know damned well what it was about." He turned and stalked away.

For a long moment Deacon Bottle stared at the empty liquor glass before him. Then a peculiar glint grew in his mild blue eyes. "See you later, Mel. Got something to attend to."

ON THE walk in front of Payton Wells' office, Deacon Bottle hesitated thoughtfully. Latigo's lawyer—crafty, devoid of scruples—he knew of old; he had locked horns with the man on more than one occasion. He shrugged, brushed open the door without knocking.

Payton Wells was a man of indefinite years, lean of face, wicked of eye. From a ragged fringe of gray hair sprang a barren skull over which he continually ran exploring fingers. A faint smile tugged

at his lips as he contemplated the Deacon.

"Welcome back, Deacon. Your head, I trust, is not overly painful?"

Deacon Bottle's round and moonlike face, ordinarily beaming, now held no expression. "No more so than ever."

"Tut? After a blow like that?" marveled Wells.

"I wondered who was behind it," said Deacon Bottle softly, and took one swift step forward. A pudgy hand darted out, caught the lawyer's thin neck. The tendons of the hand were sharply outlined under the skin as the muscles contracted. "Damn you," growled the Deacon. "Why did you do it? I shot a man and stirred up a mess, all for the sake of some rotten scheme of yours. What was it?"

But Payton Wells did not squirm under the pressure of those fingers. Motionless he sat there while the breath was being choked out of him. The Deacon, seeing that, released him with a grunt of disgust.

He coughed once, and said: "Every outlaw bucks when he first feels the saddle on him, Deacon. But he learns, he learns. Sit down."

Deacon Bottle remained standing, and the lawyer smiled thinly. "All right. Suit yourself. You want an explanation of what happened last night, don't you? I'll give it to you, but first I've got something else to say." Payton Wells' lean fingers probed at his hairless skull. "I don't imagine there's a cleverer man in this country than you, Deacon. I've often thought that if you were to work for me, I—or we—would go far."

"Last night is what I'm interested in," snapped Deacon Bottle.

The lawyer's words came chopped and brittle in reply: "I needed a hold on you, Deacon, and last night I got it."

"You mean . . .?"

"I mean that if I say the word you will be charged with attempted murder and attempted robbery." Wells' wicked eyes narrowed grimly. "Hichens, of course, will have disappeared. Your story will sound like rank drivel. The man who slugged you, Deacon, will swear that he heard you and this unknown man discussing the details of the proposed shooting and robbery."

"The devil himself hasn't a blacker heart," growled Deacon Bottle. "Why did you do all this?"

"I'm coming to that. In the meantime let me remind you of your reputation here in Latigo. This will be the first time that concrete evidence has been obtained against you. The fact that it is evidence for a crime you didn't intend to commit will make no difference."

DEACON BOTTLE'S gruff tones boomed menacingly in the little room. "Cut it short, Wells. What are you after?"

"I want a job done," rasped Wells, his voice stiffening to match the Deacon's. "And you'll do it for me. You'll do it, or put in time behind bars for shooting Clint Bailey."

"What's the job?"

Payton Wells leaned back in his chair, fingers tracing the outlines of his skull. "Mike Brier is selling off some stock," he stated abruptly. "The cattle buyer will be out there this afternoon. He'll pay Mike in cash, as he always has. Maybe you know that Mike has let his taxes run for three years. He's counting on that money to pay 'em off. If he don't pay 'em off now, Deacon, the Window-Pane'll be sold for taxes. I'll buy it." The lawyer tapped a lean finger on the desk top. "If that money is stolen, Deacon—the Window-Pane is as good as mine."

"There's a stench about you," said Deacon Bottle, "that reeks to high heaven."

"Easy now." The lawyer's face dark-

ened. "You'll do that job and like it, Deacon. And you'll plant it on Clint Bailey. With bad feeling between him and Brier, it won't be hard. You're clever, and that part is up to you."

Hot, flaming wrath beat across the Deacon's features, choking off words that crowded into his throat, tensing his pudgy hands into knotted fists that quivered at his sides. When he spoke his voice was no more than a scraping mutter.

"God! Hanging's no punishment for a rat like you, Wells. So I'm to rip the home from under an old man, am I, for the sake of your greed. And I'm to pin a jail sentence on a kid! Send him to rot behind bars for twenty years or more for a job he didn't do!"

"Yes," snapped Payton Wells. "To save your own neck, Deacon. Remember that. It's you or them, Deacon. I want Bailey's place as well as Brier's. What's the answer?"

Sweat grew out in great drops on the Deacon's forehead. He dashed it away bitterly. He strode with slow and leaden steps to the window and stood for a long while staring out with eyes which saw nothing. Then he turned back.

"If I don't do it, somebody else will, eh?"

"Naturally. But I'd rather have you. Think it over. Jail—or this!"

After a time the Deacon said, "You've got me cornered, Wells."

Payton Wells laughed softly. "I thought you were too smart not to see the light. There'll be thirty thousand dollars or more, as I figure it. Brier will have the money on him tonight, planning to bring it in to the bank in the morning."

Without another word, Deacon Bottle walked ponderously to the door. As he reached it, the lawyer spoke again. He was standing, one hand underneath the flap of his coat.

"Don't try to double-cross me, Deacon. There's no place you could go that would be too far for me to follow."

Whatever was written in Deacon Bottle's bloodshot, stormy eyes, was unreadable, but the walls of the little building rocked as the door crashed behind him.

THE heavy and sullen darkness of midnight clung about the Deacon's figure as he rode in sight of the Window-Pane. A pale glimmer of light, pathetically weak in that vast shroud of blackness, shone from a single window.

He had come from Latigo by way of Clint Bailey's Bar B. Clint Bailey he had seen in town before leaving, so he had been sure that his visit to the young rancher's property would go unmolested. In a bundle behind the cantle was the leather jacket Clint had worn on the night of the shooting.

Deacon Bottle stepped down and ground-tied his mount. He stood there, looking into the gloom that blotted out his back trail.

Someone had followed him from Latigo. Someone, he judged, whom Payton Wells had set to watch him.

The Deacon shrugged and went on foot down toward the ranch buildings and that single gleam of light. Halting at the edge of it, he peered in through the glass.

A lamp, its wick burned down, was throwing a smoky light from the table. In a worn rocker nearby sat old Michael Brier, his shaggy head bowed on his chest which heaved rhythmically.

In days gone past, half the adjoining country had walked in actual terror of Mike Brier's raging temper and his heavy hand. He had hewn the Window-Pane spread out of wastelands by the very strength of his will. It was the water he had diverted onto his land that was the source of his trouble with Clint Bailey. But now, in slumber, his white hair tum-

bling down over his eyes, his broad shoulders relaxed and drooping, he looked peculiarly weak and defenseless.

Half slipping from the open hand in his lap was an ancient, single-action revolver, and between his feet lay a black leather bag.

The back door was locked. Deacon Bottle drew from his pocket a ring, one of the items on which was a slim sliver of steel. With that he probed cautiously until a faint click told him that the door would open. He entered, padded carefully across the room with a silence which bespoke the lithe muscles hidden in his bulk. One of his silver-mounted guns he carried in his hand.

Perhaps the bag rustled as Deacon Bottle lifted it from the floor. Or perhaps Mike Brier felt a premonition of his loss. One hand clutched at the chair arm. His eyelids fluttered.

Deacon Bottle's gun barrel dropped down, not too hard, not too lightly, and the old man sank back.

The lips of the Deacon were sternly set. In his eyes was an indefinable gleam, a strange mixture of emotions which made them seem hard and somehow unnatural in the lamplight.

He backed slowly toward the door. Reaching it, he drew from beneath his black frock coat the leather jacket of Clint Bailey's. The leather made a sodden, tearing noise as he ripped the pocket from it. There was a dullish stain of dark brown on the torn fragment. A moment later the pocket was hanging from the doorknob by a thread—a man's pocket, caught on the knob, might be so wrenched away.

Deacon Bottle left it dangling there and went out into the night.

HE had reached his horse again and swung into the saddle when somewhere to his left a horse nickered softly, stopping abruptly as its rider clamped hand to nostrils.

The Deacon turned back the way he had come, listening for sounds behind him. None came, but he knew that his guard was still following him. A mile farther on, in a copse of willows which flanked a narrow stream, he stopped and dismounted.

Then through the night quiet were borne the muffled hoofbeats of a warily ridden horse.

Minutes dragged with perverse tediousness as the rider came on. Deacon Bottle could hear the great breaths of the animal, the snapping of sticks under his shod hoofs. At the edge of the stream, not a dozen yards away, he stopped.

"Hands up," snapped the Deacon. "Don't make a mis-play."

The roar of an exploding shell was his answer, and his own gun spat once, the lead driving into the center of the other spurt of flame.

There came a cry of pain. Cursing.

"Had enough?" said Deacon Bottle. "Don't try it again."

"Damn it! You've smashed my hand," snarled a familiar voice.

A half chuckle, the first sign of humor he had shown since his talk with Payton Wells, escaped the Deacon. "It don't pay to buck the Good Book," he advised drily. "That part about bearin' false witness is a law with teeth to it. Climb down, Hichens, and let's have a look at you."

He went forward carefully, keeping the dark blot that was the other under the muzzle of his gun. Pain lines tightened Hichens' narrow face as Deacon Bottle swathed the shattered hand in a hasty bandage.

The Deacon talked as he worked. "Wells put you to watching me, eh?"

"Yeah."

"With luck," said Deacon Bottle, "you'll

get out of these ropes by morning. When you get loose tell Payton Wells that the good Lord'll quit making little apples 'fore he gets his hands on this thirty thousand dollars."

"Runnin', are yuh? Think Wells won't find yuh?"

"I can make a try," promised the Deacon, knotting the rope with exaggerated care. "I can be in Danville by noon tomorrow, maybe sooner. An' from there to the Coast it's not more'n ten hours by train."

Hichens struggled in the bonds which pinned him to the roots of a sturdy willow clump.

"You clearing out for good, Deacon?"

"Who wouldn't? With a thirty thousand stake."

"Wells ain't a man to cross," advised Hichens grimly. "You won't live to spend much of it, Deacon."

In the darkness Deacon Bottle ran his hands expertly over the knots, as if making doubly sure they could not soon be loosened. He did not reply until he had climbed ponderously into saddle again. Then he said: "Stay out of this from now on, Hichens. For your own health I'm telling you. If Wells wants to come after me, let him."

"He will," growled Hichens. "He will."

The darkness concealed whatever feeling passed over the Deacon's face then, but from his throat issued a sound which surprisingly resembled laughter . . . . He urged his mount out of the willow copse. The muffled thud of his horse's hoofs raced westward through the night, in the direction of Danville.

He had gone no more than a quarter of a mile, however, when he drew to a halt, swung off and dropped his reins to the ground.

Then he went back on foot the way he had come.

A HUNDRED yards from where he had left Hichens he stretched his plump frame on the sod and waited. The unfathomable quiet which comes with the night folded around him.

Minutes passed before he was rewarded by the sound of feet stamping on the ground to shake off the last strands of a shackling rope. It was followed by a muttered flow of cursing, the creak of saddle leather as a weight settled in it. Flying hoofs pounded out of the willows and struck toward the north and Latigo.

The Deacon smiled wrily. "Fair enough," he murmured. He started at an awkward run back toward his horse.

Half an hour later he was hammering at the door of Clint Bailey's single-roomed ranch-house.

Young Bailey, clad in his underwear and squinting sleepy eyes from the sudden glare of an oil lamp, dragged open the portal. "You, Deacon?" he said. "What in blue blazes—?"

"Get a move on, son." Deacon Bottle brushed inside. "Climb into your clothes. There ain't lots of time."

"What in hell for?"

"Never mind what for right now. I owe you a debt I'm aimin' to pay off." Deacon Bottle snatched up the young rancher's trousers and flung them at him.

"Debt? What debt? You ain't drunk, are you?"

Deacon Bottle grunted. "The devil ain't brewed the liquor that'll knock my hump down, young feller." He watched as Clint slipped grudgingly into his clothes.

"Now," Bailey grumbled, "maybe you'll tell me what this is all about?"

"Sure. Stand still for a minute and listen. Mike Brier—"

He snapped his words off short, ran with clumping but oddly swift steps to the door, snaking a gun from its holster as he moved. A horse, furiously ridden,

had plunged to a halt in front of the house.

There was no knock. The door burst back on its hinges. Framed for an instant in the opening was a girl, hat pushed back by the wind from a mass of curling, flaxen hair, her eyes wide with a fear which leapt across them like a flame.

"Clint! Clint!" she sobbed out. In a flash of swirling skirts, she was across the room and in the rancher's arms.

"Marj darling—what's happened?" Clint was frowning perplexedly.

She pushed away from him until he was at arm's length, staring at him torturedly. "Oh, it's terrible Clint. Daddy's money's gone, and he thinks you took it. He's on his way now to—to kill you."

"Nonsense. I haven't been near the place and he knows it."

"But he found something, Clint. He found something of yours in the room. You've got to get out of here before he comes," she pleaded. "He swore he'd kill you for it."

Clint Bailey's lean, strong face hardened. A line down either cheek past the corners of his mouth showed gray under the tan. "Whatever he says, Marj, you don't think?"

"I'll never think it, Clint. You know that."

YOUNG Bailey turned to the Deacon who, meanwhile, had holstered his gun, as sheepishly as a five-year-old caught playing with matches.

"Is this what you meant, Deacon?"

"I reckon it is." Urgency flowed back into Deacon Bottle's speech. "The deal is as bad as she says. Mike'll come riding with his teeth bared. Thing for us to do is get out of sight."

Clint Bailey caught up a rifle and a belt of cartridges from a corner, striding for the door with Marj Brier before him.

"It's a queer business," he flung from between tight lips.

"Get moving," snapped Deacon Bottle, "or you'll have a hide full of holes."

They were some fifty feet from the darkened house when the thunder of galloping horses came booming faintly at them. Fifty feet more they made, into the scant concealment of a shallow arroyo, before the other riders slid to a plunging halt.

"Jump inside, one of you," cracked Mike Brier's angry voice. "If the coyote's there, haul him out to me."

Someone hammered on the door with a gun butt, then kicked it open. A flaming match sent out a faint, eerie light.

"Not here, Mike. Cleared out."

"The sneaking dog! Then he's the man. Thirty thousand dollars gone, and the Window-Pane with it. Damn him. I'll shoot the heart out of him!"

Beside him, Deacon Bottle left young Bailey's quivering body. The man's breath was coming in hard, panting gasps.

The girl must have felt it too, for she whispered, "Clint, Clint, don't do it. He doesn't mean it, Clint. He's an old man."

Mike Brier's voice roared again in querulous rage. "Why in hell ain't Sheriff Starling here? A trail-hawk'd run the young skunk into his hole. God, if my eyes were what they used to be. We'll bring Starling back and put him on it."

Then they were gone.

Clint Bailey was standing with his feet spread apart, staring after them. Deacon Bottle dropped a hand on his shoulder. It was still quivering, as if from cold.

"What is it?" Clint cried out fiercely. "I didn't take that money. I'd have stayed and told him so, but it'd have meant shooting him. He found something of mine in the room, did he? Who put it there?"

"Steady," said Deacon Bottle. "It's a bad mess, but maybe there's a way out. I said I owed you something. I do. I'll pay it off—or I'll be settling all my debts in hell by morning."

"How?" returned Clint bitterly. "What can you do?"

Deacon Bottle growled curtly, "Plenty. Now listen. First thing is for you two to forget you ever saw me tonight, no matter what happens. I'm trusting you for that. You, Marj, go back to the Window-Pane and stay there. Clint, stay here. Mike and Sheriff Starling will be coming back here to pick up your trail. Have you got a good horse?"

"Better'n most. He'll do."

"All right. When they show up, let 'em catch sight of you. Then draw 'em away, on the Danville road. If you can head 'em as far as Sawtooth Buttes, that'll be far enough."

"Sawtooth Buttes? What'll happen there?"

Deacon Bottle had heaved his bulk up into saddle. He looked down, and his voice held a note of chilling grimness. "What happens there ain't been wrote down in the book yet, son. Maybe you'll find that thirty thousand. Will you both do like I told you?"

"Good God!" said Clint Bailey. "I'll do anything that'll help."

"All right. I'm trusting you." Deacon Bottle's plump hand fell on the black leather bag tied behind his saddle. His spurs dug in, and his horse leaped away. The girl stared queerly after him. . . .

* * *

In the dim uncertainty of false dawn Deacon Bottle rode into the Sawtooth Buttes, a gaunt barrier of rock flung up like some proud and mighty forelock across a dozen miles of tableland. There he dismounted and carefully examined both the silver-mounted guns holstered beneath his black frock coat. Screened from the road in a hollow which commanded a view of the approach over the prairie, he settled himself to wait. Another factor also led to his choice of this spot. A cleft in the rock permitted an escape to the rear—if necessary, unseen.

Daylight was just breaking when two figures swung into view, flogging their mounts at a killing pace over the trail he had so recently covered. Deacon Bottle watched them come, a smile that had no humor in it curving his full lips.

The riders roared across the intervening stretch of prairie, sped with a hollow clamor in among the buttes. Deacon Bottle stood erect, still shielded from their sight, and drew his guns. One of them sent a shot blasting skyward.

That warning sound stopped the two, held their foaming rush as if the wave of noise had been a concrete body catapulting against them.

"Far enough, Payton Wells," said Deacon Bottle. "This is the end."

The horses of the two men spun around, prancing from fear of the gun-crash. "You, is it, Deacon?" spat Payton Wells, searching for the voice. "Decided running would be no good, eh?"

"You might have known I wouldn't run from you, Wells. There's only one way to clean my hands of the soil you've put on them." He hesitated. "You had to come too, didn't you, Hichens?"

Hichens snarled back, "My left hand's good, Deacon."

Deacon Bottle might have shot the two from where he stood. His mind held that point, considered it, then he shrugged. His fingers tightened around the grips of his guns.

"I'm coming out, Wells. I'll come shooting."

His big body moved with catlike, uncanny swiftness to a gap in the rocks where the early morning sunlight sent a beam like a rosy flame playing upon him.

A shrill clatter of shots floated up into the quiet air over Sawtooth Buttes. The big body of Deacon Bottle jerked to the impact of lead. . . .

THE brassy sun had climbed more than an hour into the sky, when far to the eastward a thin shaft of dust spiraled upward from the racing heels of a horse and rider. Then behind the lone figure spurted up a second cloud. Three horsemen were not far behind him, lashing furiously.

Clint Bailey sent a hurried glance over his shoulder as a shot rang out and the lead sang disquietingly close. Then he stared questioningly ahead at the Sawtooth Buttes, still half a mile distant. He had done as Deacon Bottle had bidden him, and spurring at his back were Sheriff Enoch Starling, old Michael Brier and one of the Window-Pane riders. He loosened the rifle slung in front of the saddle.

Unnoticed by young Bailey, another rider came at a lope up out of a depression in the prairie, then burst into a gallop, heading to meet him before he reached the buttes.

Clint rode on grimly, eyes fixed ahead. Suddenly a puff of smoke blossomed against the dark background of the butte; lead plowed into the turf twenty yards in front of his horse. Bewildered, he jerked up the rifle. Two more shots came echoing from the butte. Someone was lodged there, commanding the road. He pulled up his horse, darted a look back.

Then he saw the lone rider swinging in between him and pursuit. A sharp exclamation burst from him. The rider was Marj Brier! She had ridden to Sawtooth Buttes rather than to the Window-Pane.

That Mike Brier and the sheriff recognized her as well was indicated by the cessation of firing from their quarter.

Bailey whirled his mount and rode back toward her. She came on to him, flaxen hair flying loose beneath her hat.

"Marj!" he called out to her. "What did you come for? You know you can't stay here."

She was breathless, but her eyes were sparkling. "I couldn't stay any place else, Clint. Not with you here."

There was a period of perplexed silence, then Mike Brier was coming at them, roaring: "Cut him down, Sheriff, the sneaking thief! Stand away from him, Marj! What in hell're you doing here? Get out of line, will you?"

Sheriff Starling's blunt tones boomed out, "Steady now, Mike. There ain't nothing proved yet. The kid ain't making out to fight."

Face bleached of color under its tan, Clint Bailey stared as they circled him. He held the rifle tightly across his knees. "I didn't take your money, Mike," he snapped. "Think what you damned please, but I didn't take it."

Brier shouted hoarsely, "You lie, Bailey! It was your pocket, torn off that leather jacket, hanging on the door. There was blood on it to prove it, same blood I saw the night you got shot."

The last slender thread of reserve snapped in young Clint Bailey. His rifle swung up, centered on Mike's breast.

At that moment a fresh shot cracked from the butte. The lead stung Clint's mount in the shoulder, so that it swung around, wild-eyed.

Marj Brier spurred her horse between the two men. "Stop it, both of you!" she cried. "Clint hasn't got the money. The man who took it is up there in the buttes! He thought Clint was riding on his trail. That's why he shot at him!"

ALL five of them stared at the rock. Up from a hollow was drifting a gossamer wisp of smoke.

"Damn," rumbled Mike Brier. "Maybe she's right. If he's there we'll nail him."

He tugged at his horse's bridle, but already Clint Bailey had steeled his mount into a racing charge toward the butte and that hollow in the rock. The hidden gun-

man snapped a hail of lead at the riders as they came on. The explosions rocketed out from the wall of rock in a harsh crescendo. Yet strangely, none of that lead touched the racing men. . . .

The Window-Pane puncher was left hopelessly behind at the start. Then in mid-stride Sheriff Enoch Starling's mount plunged one hoof into a treacherously-concealed gopher hole. He went down heavily, flinging his rider in a sprawling arc. Starling stumbled to his feet, followed the rest at a limping run.

Clint Bailey was firing from the shoulder as he rode, the sharp crack of his rifle punctuating the rapid thud of hoofs. Thirty yards behind him came Mike Brier, bellowing hoarsely.

Clint Bailey had reached the foot of the slope, almost upon the hollow, when Brier's horse stopped dead in its tracks, staggered and buckled to the ground with a bullet through its heart. Cursing, old Mike stared at it and then at Clint, who had dismounted and was clambering up the last stretch of rock-strewn grade.

One shot, spiteful and detached, boomed from the hollow. Then it was silent.

Clint Bailey was jamming in fresh cartridges. After an agonizing time he reached the edge, swung himself up. He stood there, looking down, until the others reached his side. Crumpled together on the rock floor were two men—Hichens and Payton Wells, both dead! Between them lay the black leather bag.

Mike Brier climbed down, silently picked up the bag and opened it. He turned his eyes up toward Clint Bailey.

"Reckon I misjudged you, son," he said. "I've got so old I can't trust myself to go on the prod no more. Maybe it's my fault you an' me ain't hit it off." He paused, temporarily at a loss for further words. "Nothing more I can say except—well, I ain't standing in the way of you and Marj any longer."

Clint Bailey grinned. "Forget it—Dad," he said.

Enoch Starling was examining the bodies. "You're both a couple of fools," he stated. "Come on an' give me a hand packin' these gents to their horses."

They were in the midst of that operation when Deacon Bottle, anxious of face and panting, puffed up the trail from the Danville side.

"Anything wrong?" he queried. "Heard the shooting and made it as fast as I could. Oh—" His eyes fell on the bodies. "Sins caught up with 'em, eh? Crookedness don't pay," he added piously. "Folks never seem to learn." His round face beamed at Clint and Marj. "Nice seein' you two together. What's that, Sheriff?"

Enoch Starling, a scowl on his sternly-chiseled features, was motioning him aside. The Deacon rode over to him.

"Look here, Deacon," Starling muttered. "I ain't said anything, and I don't know as I'm going to. But these two gents have been dead at least an hour. Somebody else was doing this shooting. An' furthermore, they was killed with a forty-five an' not with a rifle like Clint was usin'. Know anything about it?"

"Me?" said the Deacon aggrievedly. "What would I know about such wickedness?"

"It's funny, your showing up just now," grunted Starling. "It seems to me—why man! Your coat's bloody! You've got a bullet in your side. How in hell did that happen?"

A twinkle crept into Deacon Bottle's mild blue eyes, and his moonlike face creased in a smile. "I was wrestling, Sheriff—" he said solemnly—"wrestling with the devil. An' my anger got the best of me."

LONGRIDER

By Walt Coburn
(Author of "Injun List," etc.)

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LONGRIDER RECKONING

Complete Western Novelette

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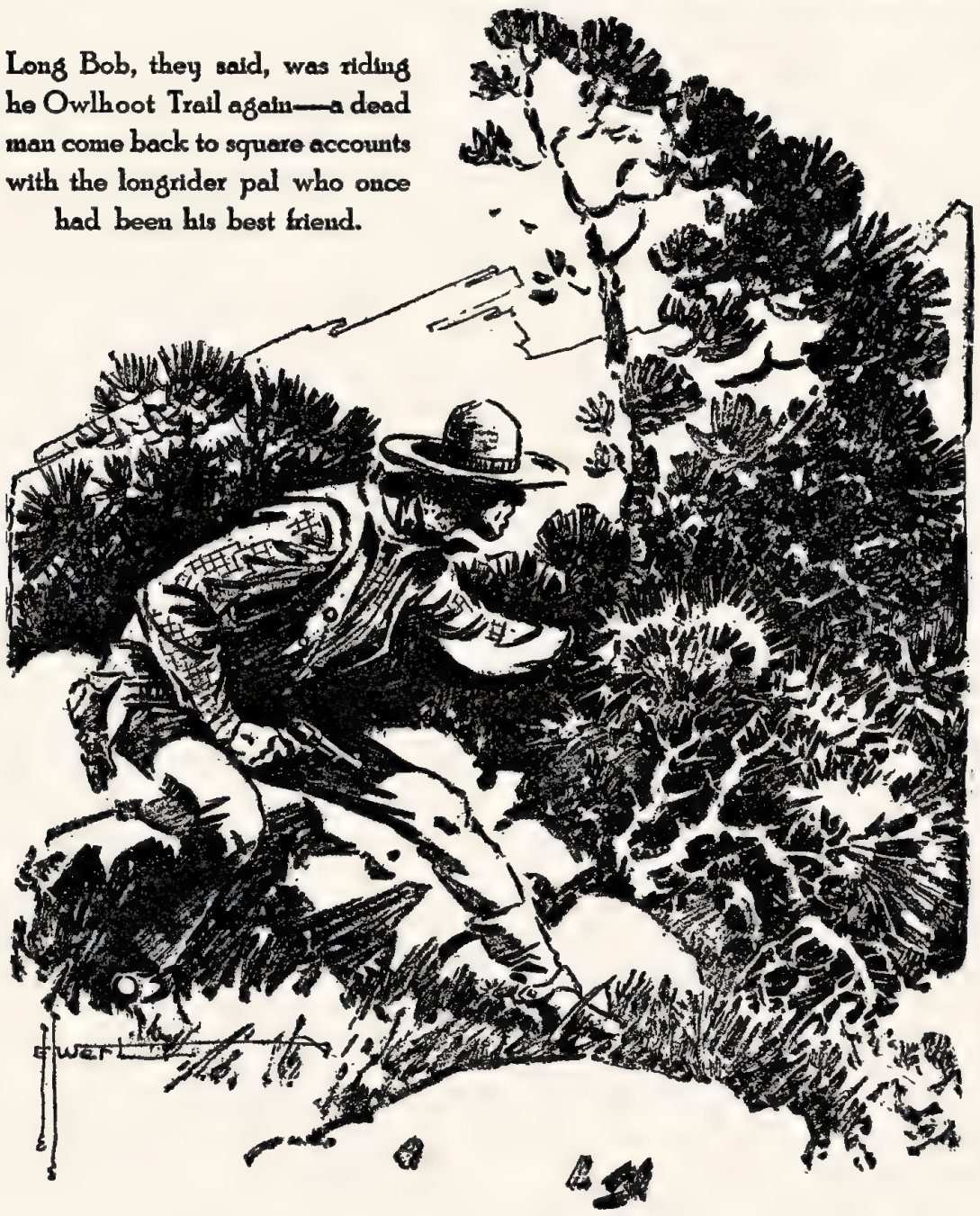

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She had married Hugh Tracy, who now ran a ranch in the heart of the Montana badlands that was used as a hideout for

the outlaws who came that way. The girl's name was Cherry and her father had been an old time outlaw, her mother a woman of the frontier dance halls. She was the only woman Long Bob Bailey had ever wanted—and now she was Hugh Tracy's wife.

The rustling of the leaves carried the news to that ranch in the badlands. Over a whisky bottle a renegade whispered the story to Hugh Tracy, who laughed shortly.

"Long Bob is dead. He's been dead two years now. Somebody's been drinkin' loco juice and is seein' spooks. Long Bob was killed down in Mexico."

But Hugh Tracy's laugh was a little too loud to be natural. And while he ridiculed the news about Long Bob, he took care that the doors were barred that night and every night thereafter. And he saw to it that the shades were pulled. He began to drink more than was his custom and became more than usually abusive to Cherry, whose snapping, coal-black eyes could so well express the growing scorn she felt for this man who, in the few short months since his whirlwind courtship, had so completely shattered whatever regard she may once have had for her dead lover's best friend.

"I wish Bob was here," she snapped. "He'd take you to the kind of cleaning you need."

"He never was man enough to handle me," growled Tracy. "He never saw the day he could whup me any way, shape ner fashion. He was yellow as a coyote. And if he hadn't bin foolin' around with that Mexican wench he'd never have got killed. Her man was a Mexican general who hated gringoes. Long Bob got what he asked for, no more, no less. A firin' squad with his back against a mud wall. They say he begged like a yellow dog."

"You've told me all that before," she flamed. "I know it by heart. And I say you lie. Long Bob was a man. What are you? Just a whisky peddler that's too lazy to work and too yellow to ride the Owlhoot Trail."

So they battled, Hugh Tracy and his pretty, embittered wife, there at Hugh's whisky ranch in the badlands.

A BIG man was Hugh Tracy, large-boned, handsome in a coarse way, with a swaggering, bulldozing manner. His eyes were greenish, a little too small under shaggy, sandy brows.

It was Hugh Tracy who had first brought the news out of Mexico that Long Bob Bailey had been jailed and killed down there on account of a love affair with the Mexican sweetheart of some general. Long Bob and Hugh Tracy had been partners for several years. Both had been cowboys and had worked for the same outfits. Then they had taken to the outlaw trail and had ridden it from Canada to Mexico. They had gathered a group of picked men and Long Bob had been elected leader. That election was something that had bruised the vanity of Hugh Tracy who considered himself tough.

They had stuck up a train and held up a bank in Arizona, then the bunch had scattered, drifting into Mexico until things cooled down. Hugh had wantonly killed an express messenger who was a little tardy in raising his hands. Long Bob had taken him to task for the unwarranted killing.

"You was drunk, Hugh, and you killed that boy without givin' him any part of a chance. This is our last job together. One of us quits this gang. We'll decide when we meet again. It'll be up to the boys. Now we got to drift into Chihuahua and split this money. We'll meet up in Montana in July."

The two of them had gone down into Chihuahua, to hide out and to divide their share of the loot. And a month later

Hugh Tracy met the gang at their hideaway in Montana. He brought back Long Bob's share of the loot—and the story of how Long Bob had died.

"I'm quittin' the game, boys," he told the gang. "Goin' to marry and settle down. A few head of cattle, a saloon where you boys kin cure your thirst, some poker now and then, an a purty lookin' wife. Me and Cherry is gettin' married."

According to their lights there was nothing wrong in that. Hugh had been Long Bob's best friend. It was no more than right that he should sort of look after Cherry. And a married man had no business riding the Owlhoot Trail. Besides, a place like Hugh planned building would be a good idea. They chose a new leader and rode their renegade way.

Long Bob was forgotten, save for the stories that were told about him when they gathered around a campfire. Long Bob was dead. They spoke of him as men speak of a dead comrade.

But now, months later, the rustling of the leaves whispered that Long Bob was not dead. He was drifting, the word went out, up the Owlhoot Trail. . . . And Hugh Tracy, drinking more whisky than was good for him, took care that his doors were locked of nights and his shades pulled low.

CHAPTER TWO

Traitor

HUGH TRACY suffered during the weeks that followed. The hell of it was that there was no definite news, no real proof to show that Long Bob was alive. That's what ate like a cancer into the whisky-fogged brain of Hugh Tracy as the days lengthened into weeks and Long Bob failed to show up there in the badlands. Weeks of torture for Hugh Tracy, whose hand never strayed far from the butt of his gun. His ugly moods were more frequent now. He was never sober. Whenever a man stopped at his place he would ask him for news of Long Bob Bailey.

"A feller said he sighted him down in New Mexico," a man would say. "He was scarred up some and had whiskers and didn't speak when he was spoken to. But this feller says it was Long Bob all right. That was at a ranch in the Animas Valley in New Mexico. The feller had knowed Long Bob years ago. He says Long Bob pulled out before daylight next mornin'."

Another rider of the Owlhoot Trail brought more definite word concerning Long Bob.

"I met him in a saloon in Prescott, Arizona. He was playin' poker. His face is scarred up and he was wearin' a mustache and dark glasses. But it was Long Bob. I said howdy to him and called him Bob. He said he reckoned I had the wrong gent because his name wasn't Bob at all. But it was him just the same. I'd bet my best horse it was Long Bob Bailey I spoke to, even if he is scarred up and has got gray headed. Yep, that was Long Bob."

That was disquieting news. Hugh Tracy slept fitfully that night, his gun in his hand. He kept trying to make himself believe that the rustling of the leaves lied. How could Long Bob be alive? He himself had paid a hundred pesos to have Long Bob falsely arrested. He had seen him dragged off to jail, fighting like a crazy man as they clubbed him down and dragged him, unconscious, into their filthy *cuartel.* There was the promise of a firing squad at daylight. Hugh had not waited for that. He had taken the money Long Bob had cached and had headed for Montana, bringing with him his story.

That was over a year ago, and Long Bob must indeed be dead. He had to be dead. These bits of news were lies. Or maybe there was some man who looked

like Long Bob. There might be something in that.

Nevertheless, Hugh Tracy's sleep was fitful, uneasy. When he did drop off to sleep he kept having wild dreams from which he would jerk awake, bathed in cold sweat, his gun in his unsteady hand.

"What's gotten into you?" Cherry would ask him when he would jump awake from one of those nightmares. "Are you going loco?"

"Somethin' I et for supper. Them biscuits of yourn would give any man the bellyache."

"Better ease up on that moonshine booze you make. It would give any man the snakes. Uncock that gun before it goes off and hits me. Who are you scared of, anyhow?"

"I ain't scared of any man. Shut up or I'll slap you quiet."

Men who visited the badlands ranch could not fail to notice the change that had come over Hugh Tracy. He no longer set up drinks and told stories across his liquor-stained pine board bar. He was quarrelsome and surly and always kept his eye on the door. It made his customers uneasy to have Hugh forever acting as if he expected the law to drop in on them. When they asked him what he was watching for he would curse them. . . .

And the rustling of the leaves carried the news of Hugh Tracy's behavior back down the Owlhoot Trail—down through Wyoming, Colorado, Utah, Arizona and into New Mexico. It found its way into remote camps where outlaws gathered. Some said that Hugh Tracy was going loco. Others said he was merely killing himself with his own rotten hooch. But a tall man with a scarred face and black whiskers smiled faintly in the light of the campfire, there in the Mogollons in New Mexico, when he heard what the rustling of the leaves whispered about Hugh Tracy.

NOR was that all that the rustling of the leaves told along the Owlhoot Trail. There was a whispering about the bits of hard luck that had befallen more than one man who rode that crooked trail of the outlaw.

Down in Arizona John Law had reached out and snared three out of four of a gang that had attempted a bank hold-up. The fourth member of the gang had gotten away. And the story he told in the hideaway places was that somebody must have tipped off John Law beforehand because there'd been a dozen deputies there, surrounding the bank when they stepped off their horses to make the stick-up.

In Utah two other gangs had met a similar fate. In each case one man was allowed to escape. There had been some fast shooting both times. Each time one of the gang had gotten away, carrying the news of defeat to those who rode the outlaw trail.

A train robbery in Wyoming was disastrous for the hard-bitten men who had tried it. Once more a single man ran the gauntlet of gunfire and brought his story to the hidden campfires where the hunted men gather.

So the rustling of the leaves told these wanted men that there were traitors riding the outlaw trail, men hired by John Law to listen to what plans were made, then send in reports.

The owlhooters began to eye one another with suspicion. Every man was afraid to trust even the members of his own gang. They were afraid to talk to one another, afraid to plan a big job. Outlaw leaders weeded out every man whom they suspected might not be right. There were a few killings. Any man who drank much was under immediate suspicion. Whisky loosens many a tongue. Heavy drinkers were finding it hard to join any gang. Even the horse thieves would not

hire the men who hit the bottle too hard.

That hurt Hugh Tracy's trade a lot. Not only was he losing his customers, but more than one man suspected him of being too loose of tongue. One outlaw openly accused him of selling secrets to John Law. Hugh Tracy all but killed the man, but that didn't clear him of the charge that had been made.

Then there was Cherry. Men on the dodge, if they are half way wise, are always suspicious of a woman. Cherry was Hugh Tracy's wife. She knew too much about what went on. Cherry was a woman. Women talk. The wise outlaws avoided Hugh Tracy's place.

Hugh Tracy grew more ugly and sullen each day. He would sit there on the river bank, his back against a big cottonwood, with a whisky bottle beside him and a sawed-off shotgun across his lap. He would stare by the hour at the muddy current of the Missouri where it lapped at the high clay banks. Other times he would empty his six-shooter at bits of driftwood floating downstream, cursing if he missed the difficult target. But Hugh Tracy seldom missed.

Some who had seen him lately said that he had gone loco. He never shaved any more and his clothes were never clean. His hair was uncombed, matted, inches too long. And his bloodshot green eyes had a wild look that made a man shudder.

One night when Hugh Tracy got dead drunk Cherry saddled a horse and rode away. He swore he would find her and kill her, but he could not pick up her trail. After a few days he quit trying. In a week the log cabin which Cherry had kept so neat was a mess. Unwashed dishes and pots and pans littered the place. The once well-scrubbed pine board floor was tracked with mud. Empty bottles and cigaret stubs added to the disorder. The bed was unmade.

Hugh Tracy, when he would look at the disorder, would curse her for running away. He cursed the littered mess but made no effort to clean it up. He would fry some meat and potatoes and open a can of tomatoes. Sometimes he would make biscuits, warmed over coffee thick with grounds. He ate out of the skillets.

So the rustling of the leaves told the story that Hugh Tracy was going loco.

And, now in Colorado, a man with a scarred face and black beard heard it and smiled as he smoked by the longrider campfire.

CHAPTER THREE

Long Bob

"IF you ain't Long Bob Bailey," drawled an undersized little cowpuncher with puckered blue eyes and a skin the color of an old saddle, "I'll eat my hat."

The man with the scarred face grinned faintly at the short, bowlegged man in service-worn chaps and faded denim jumper. He looked at the little man's battered hat. It had been black once. Now it was sweat-marked, dust-coated, shapeless.

"A man would have a job on his hands eatin' that hunk of headgear, short feller. Wash it in the crick before you commence on it. It'll stand a bath. Then eat it."

The two men had met at a cowboy line camp where each had stopped to get something to eat. They had ridden up about the same time. Now they stood by the little log cabin, their saddled horses beside them, the bridle reins dragging the ground. Strangers traveling through were welcome at these isolated camps.

"I ain't eatin' it. I've knowed you since you was a button and worked for me in Montana. Heard you was dead. Heard again that you wasn't. There ain't no

sense lyin' to me, Bob. I done read your brand when I seen you ride down that slant. No man but Long Bob ever set a horse like that when said horse is slidin' down a steep 'un on his rump. I ain't eatin' no hat. There's grub inside the cabin an' I got a cavity to fill. Call yourself any name you got a mind to, and I'll agree with yuh. But remember this, you long-geared son, I ain't eatin' ary hat."

The man with the scarred face grinned and nodded. They stood there, the little old cowboy and the younger, taller man. Their eyes met in a steady glance. Then the little cowpuncher opened the cabin door and let the way inside.

The man with the scarred face saw the little cowpuncher reach into a sack of brown beans as they started getting dinner. He groped down in the sack and brought out a piece of paper which he quickly shoved in the pocket of his overalls. The scarred-faced man pretented not to notice, but there was a queer look in his eyes as he finished slicing the bacon.

"You work here on this range?" asked the man with the scarred face.

"Off and on. Just in case you don't know, my name is Knight—Shorty Knight—just a driftin' cowboy."

"And since you ain't got any appetite for felt hats, call me Bob—Long Bob Bailey if that will help your digestion. You build some biscuits while I cut some meat and get this coffee made. In case a stranger or two shows up, my name is Bill Jones."

"Never was much of a hand at introducin' folks. I let 'em do it themselves—Bill."

They didn't do much talking as they got their noonday meal. Dishes washed, cigarettes smoked, they tightened their saddle cinches.

"Whichaway?" asked the little cowboy.

"Just driftin' north some. Wherever the climate fits my clothes is where I ride to. Whichaway for you?"

"Ridin' into town for a bottle. Camp at the cabin just beyond the gravel ford on Cottonwood, and I'll ketch up with yuh by supper time. Nobody there at the cabin but there's grub. I'll fetch the bottle."

"I'll think it over," said the man with the scarred face as he swung into saddle.

"So-long," said the little old cowpuncher.

"So-long."

They parted there at the line camp, each taking a different course across the rolling prairie.

But half an hour later the man with the scarred face circled back to the camp. Inside the cabin, he groped in the sack of beans, looked disappointed when he found nothing. He searched the cabin thoroughly, swiftly. But the search was vain.

He swore softly under his breath as he once more headed for the gravel crossing on Cottonwood Creek.

BUT that night he was waiting at the cabin beyond Cottonwood Creek when the man who had called himself Shorty Knight rode up with the promised bottle. They sat beside a campfire, saying little. Now and then the bottle would pass from hand to hand. Shorty Knight had brought along a pack horse laden with bed and a meagre camp outfit.

"I'm driftin'," he explained. "Got a few drinks in town and broke out with the itchin' foot. Want to see new range. A man gits all warped an' cramped stayin' too long on one range. Mind my throwin' in with yuh?"

"I kin stand it if you can."

"I'm headin' fer Montana," Shorty Knight explained. "Just kinda driftin'."

They had another drink or two. Shorty

Knight got to talking. He seemed to know every cow outfit from Canada to Mexico. He knew the names of the foremen and the top horses. He recalled incidents that had happened years ago at Tombstone, Dodge City, Santa Fe, all the way up the old cattle trail from Texas where he had been born.

Gradually his talk drifted to outlaws, past and present. Old time gun-fighters like Billy the Kid, Black Jack, others he had known. Later day outlaws like Butch Cassidy, Kid Curry and the other men who rode with the Wild Bunch.

"I knowed 'em, rode with 'em—same as I've rode with fellers like you and Hugh Tracy. Speakin' of Hugh Tracy, they tell me he's half loco. Battier'n hell. Ever hear from him?"

"He's up in Montana, ain't he?"

"He's got a place there in the badlands along the Missouri River. Thought you knowed. Married a girl named Cherry Smith." Shorty Knight took another drink. He was leaning back against his bedroll and his face was in the shadow. As he spoke his puckered blue eyes watched the expression on the other man's face.

"They tell me," he said, passing the bottle to the scarred-faced man, "that Hugh Tracy run her off. Some claim he killed her and then throwed her body in the river."

"I hadn't heard." The other's voice was calm, unhurried. He took a drink from the bottle.

From that point on the conversation lagged somewhat. After the fire died down they went to bed, the dead ashes of the fire separating the two tarp-covered beds. Nearby their saddle horses and pack horses grazed.

Both men seemed to sleep lightly in spite of the fact they had ridden a long ways. When one of them moved, the other moved under his blankets. Both slept with their guns handy.

The man with the scarred face kept wondering if Shorty Knight had watched him with his field glasses when he backtrailed to that line camp after they had separated. And he wondered just what kind of a game Shorty was playing now.

THAT reference to Cherry and Hugh Tracy had been put out as bait. But it hadn't worked. At least the man with the scarred face told himself it hadn't worked. He didn't want Shorty Knight or any other man to be positive of his identity. Let them keep that element of doubt in their minds. This game he was now playing was one of his own invention. He wanted to play it in his own way, alone, unaided.

Only to himself would he admit the fact that he was Long Bob Bailey. Bob Bailey, who'd been sold out by the man he had trusted and befriended, deserted by men whom he had led through many a dangerous tight. They had left him down there in Mexico to be killed for a crime he had not committed, a framed-up charge.

Hugh Tracy had ridden away, leaving him to be shot down without a fair trail. Hugh Tracy had sold his friend's life for a hundred pesos. Long Bob Bailey smiled bitterly. Hugh had not reckoned on the little Mexican girl at the cantina. Hugh had made ardent love to her, then had used her in his plot to have Long Bob Bailey killed by a jealous Mexican officer.

True, Long Bob had befriended the girl. He had felt sorry for her and had helped her. She was hardly more than a child. He had told her not to let Hugh Tracy make love to her; that Hugh's promises to marry her were lies; that she had better marry a man of her own country. So when Hugh Tracy rode away in

the night, that little dancing girl knew that Long Bob had spoken the truth. She learned that Long Bob was in the cuartel, under sentence of death. So she had gone to her Mexican officer and promised to marry him if he would set Long Bob free.

"The gringo will be set free," promised her Mexican lover.

And after a fashion he kept his word. Long Bob had been released from the cuartel. Released under that law of Mexico known as *Ley del Fuego,* the Law of Fire. The Law of Escape as it is sometimes called. Free to walk the streets but bound by law not to leave the town. There would be given him ample opportunity to escape, then he would be shot down.

Now, under his blankets and tarp, looking up at the stars, Long Bob Bailey thought back and recalled those days and nights when he had waited his chance, down there in that Mexican town where he had been deserted by his men, betrayed by his friend whom he had trusted. Alone, without money or a horse or a gun, he had managed to live for a few weeks. He did odd jobs for a few centavos a day, bearing grimly the contempt of the Mexicans who hired him. And always he watched for a fighting chance to make a break.

The Mexican officer, now married to the little dancing girl, had sneered at him, taunted him, made his life a miserable hell on earth. For he still believed that his wife was in love with the tall gringo outlaw. He took great delight in watching Long Bob swamping in the cantina where the little señorita had once danced, where Long Bob had once bought entertainment after the spendthrift manner of his breed. It was the only job left to Long Bob and he took it rather than starve.

Heartbreaking weeks, no hour of which went by without its insults. They were goading him into making a break for freedom. Nights he slept in a little tumbledown adobe hut, all but roofless, without so much as a serape or blanket for cover. And because it was the season of the rains, the hut was, for most of the time, a mud puddle. His clothes were badly worn. He trimmed his hair and beard with his jackknife which they had overlooked somehow when they took what they found in his pockets.

Thus Long Bob led his derelict life of shame. He was glad he was the only white man in this flea-bitten adobe town. That no fellow countryman could see him as he was now, a lowly swamper, cursed at and spit upon by drunken Mexicans.

And each night he waited for that one desperate chance to escape.

CHAPTER FOUR

Lay del Fuego

NOW Long Bob lay on his back under his tarp, watching the stars in a Colorado sky. Across the ashes of the dead fire was a man whom he dared not trust. Long Bob had lost his faith in every man. He trusted nobody. Once he had trusted Hugh Tracy. Now he played a lone hand.

Those stars reminded him of that little dancing girl and his escape from Mexico. She it was who had given him his chance to run that gauntlet of death. A slim chance, to be sure, but nevertheless a chance. For every hour of the day and night armed men had watched this gringo renegade. And the officer in command of the cuartel took a keen delight in the hourly torture he was inflicting upon the man he hated. Even as he enjoyed the mental suffering of the little dancing girl whose dark eyes misted with pity for the one man who had been her real friend.

That escape came abruptly, without giving Long Bob a chance to make a plan of any sort. It came at midnight, there in the cantina where the com-

mandante of the cuartel and his dancing girl señora sat watching the entertainment, while Long Bob carried trays of bottles and glasses to the crowded tables. A fiesta was in full swing.

Outside at the hitching racks were saddled horses. Vaqueros from all the country around were in town. Cavalry horses stood out there, carbines in the saddle scabbards. They belonged to the soldiers who were the mounted escort for the commandante. They had paraded, off and on, since early morning. The commandante's big black gelding was being held by a sleepy soldier half drunk from mescal.

Inside the cantina the commandante was giving a banquet for his officers. He was half drunk, belligerant, anxious for some chance to show his authority. A big man with a carefully trimmed mustache and pouchy eyes, this officer who had married the little dancing girl. He bore the rank of colonel. Bore it with arrogance.

Long Bob, sweeping up the butts of cigars and cigarettes, passed behind the chair of the ex-dancing girl. She turned her head and smiled, speaking to him.

"I am chilly. Will you please bring my shawl from my dressing room. My old dressing room. I left it there."

Long Bob found the black Spanish shawl lying folded on the dressing table. He grinned faintly as he reached to pick it up. Playing ladies' maid was sure a new job for Long Bob Bailey, outlaw leader. Then as he touched the shawl, his expression changed. Inside its black silk folds was something hard. His hand groped inside it, came out with his gun and cartridge belt.

He buckled on the belt and quickly examined the gun. The feel of it was like the handclasp of an old friend. Then he saw the tightly rolled bit of paper in the barrel of the gun. He took it out and read its brief, pitiful message:

Go with God. I love you. Chiquita.

Now he could understand what she had tried to tell him with her dark eyes. Her life with that swaggering, tequila drinking commandante must be a hell on earth. It would be worse than that if ever that officer discovered her regard for Long Bob Bailey.

"It'll be both of us or nothin'," he told himself as he picked up her shawl.

Looking back on it all now, remembering, he grinned faintly as he watched the stars in the Colorado sky.

He'd taken the biggest, hardest chance of his life that night when he brought back that black shawl to the banquet table. Dropping the black silk shawl across her ivory shoulders. Then his gun poked into the back of the commandante.

"Chiquita and I are leaving together, you *cabron*," Long Bob had told that astonished, half drunken commandante in a low tone. "One word, one wrong move and I'll kill you. Walk with us to the outside door. Remember, I never wanted to kill a man in my life like I want to kill you. Pronto, *cabron*, or I'll pull the trigger."

That Mexican officer was no man's coward but he knew when to be discreet. He had walked outside to the door, after making some excuse to his guests. Long Bob had then ordered him to give his soldiers instructions to remain behind while the three of them, the commandante, Chiquita and the outlawed gringo rode out of town. Ten miles out of the town Long Bob ordered the Mexican to dismount. And there, in the moonlight, the two had fought with knives. Long Bob with his pocket knife, the commandante with a long bladed knife he always carried. Half an hour later Long Bob, his face slashed horribly, had ridden on towards the border with the dancing girl. Behind them,

beside the trail to the north, lay the dead body of the commandante.

So much for the Ley del Fuego.

LONG BOB stirred under his tarp and rolled a smoke. He was thinking of Chiquita, whom he had left safe and secure and happy in a Texas border town, content in the knowledge that she had aided her hero, Long Bob, to escape from Mexican slavery—and of that other woman, Cherry, whom he had loved and who had married his betrayer.

A man who follows the Owlhoot Trail knows the real meaning of lonesomeness. Underneath his hardness there is an intense longing for other things. Things like a wife, love, a home, youngsters. Long Bob's cigarette went out. Daylight crept across the sky. He quit his blanket and made a fire.

"Sleep good?" asked Shorty Knight.

"Like a cottonwood log. You?"

"Like a granite rock."

Long Bob washed and made the coffee. Daylight made him forget Chiquita and made him remember the job he had to do. Having Shorty Knight along would sort of complicate things, maybe. But he was curious to know more about Shorty and just why he had taken the notion of drifting up into Montana. Well, he was company, even if he couldn't be trusted. So what the hell!

CHAPTER FIVE

Bounty Hunter

LONG BOB BAILEY and Shorty Knight stayed at hidden camps along the Owlhoot Trail. Shorty made a congenial companion with his leathery grin and his dry humor. Long Bob almost lost his distrust of the man. Almost. But the bitterness in his heart would not let him completely trust any man.

Each place they camped they heard the bits of news told by the rustling of the leaves. News that came from unknown sources. News that concerned the hunted men who followed the outlaw trail. And at every camp where they found outlaws they were warned about the man or men who were traitors to their kind. Always that shadow of treachery that was haunting them.

Long Bob made it a point to watch Shorty Knight when talk of that sort was passed around. But nothing in the little old cowboy's manner hinted that he might be a party to that treachery. Yet Long Bob had seen him take a note from the sack of beans at that line camp. And Long Bob had his reasons for thinking the note had been left there by some traitor, some spy who was sending information to John Law.

Up in Wyoming Long Bob quit camp one night when everybody else was asleep. He was back the next morning about sunrise. His left arm was in a crude sling, wrapped in a blood-stained bandage made from his undershirt. There was a bullet hole in the crown of his hat.

As he unsaddled and ate breakfast he volunteered no information of any kind. Nobody asked him a question, though it was all too plain that every man in camp was curious. One of them had put a clean bandage on Long Bob's arm. Shorty Knight had bathed the ugly flesh wound with whisky. But not even Shorty asked a single question.

Then Long Bob and Shorty traveled on, headed for the Jackson Hole country. At a camp a few nights later the rustling of the leaves brought news of a hold-up and shooting scrape at a Wyoming town. The hold-up took place on the night that Long Bob had made that lone ride. A gambling house had been held up by a lone man. There had been some shooting before the lone outlaw got away with several thousand dollars he had taken from the games

and the till. Two men had been shot down, both badly wounded. They owned the gambling house. Both had once been known as members of Long Bob Bailey's gang. The hold-up man had worn no mask. And while neither of the wounded men had made a statement of any kind the authorities claimed that the lone bandit was none other than Long Bob Bailey.

The man who brought this news to the outlaw camp was excited. He had ridden up out of the dark night and dismounted at the campfire. As he told his story he did not notice Long Bob, sitting squat legged, back there in the shadows. The man was half drunk, anyhow.

"And the law is on Long Bob's trail," the fellow went on. "John Law is trackin' him down. There's a ten thousand dollar bounty on his scalp and one of the slickest cowboy detectives in the business is out to collect that reward money. Ain't no two ways to it, Long Bob Bailey is alive and he's ridin' the Hootowl Trail. Somebody is goin' to tip off this detective and hell will bust loose. Ten thousand dollars is a lot of cash. I'm glad they don't want me that bad. I wouldn't trust my own grandmother if I was wanted for that much. Yep, some gent will turn Long Bob in, sure as hell. And this fast shootin' detective will give him a divvy of the reward he collects on Long Bob's dead hide."

"You'd know Long Bob if you sighted him?" asked Shorty Knight casually.

"I rode with Long Bob and Hugh Tracy," said the man, pulling the cork from a bottle. "I know both the gents that was shot in their gamblin' house. I belonged to Long Bob's gang. I'd know him in hell, mister, no matter how he's changed."

"You'd like some part of that bounty money?" continued Shorty Knight.

"Not me, feller. I ain't that loco, even if I have bin on a drunk. You heard me say I'd rode with Long Bob. Only a skunk would try for that kind of money. I'll throw in with Long Bob any day and fight for him. Say, who are you?"

"A friend of Long Bob's," replied Shorty Knight.

"You wasn't one of his bunch."

"I didn't claim I was, mister. I said I was a friend of his, that's all."

The half drunken cowboy stood there, a little unsteady on his bowed legs, his whisky bottle in his left hand. He was of medium height, heavy set, blunt featured. His bloodshot eyes were narrowed, glittering. His tone was getting ugly.

"Know what I think?" he said thickly. "Know what I think, you little old dried up wart? I think I seen you once before. I think I seen you in the sheriff's office at Rawlins when they had me in jail there. Yeah. There was a badge pinned to your vest. And you claim to be a friend of Long Bob's. Know what I got a mind to do? Know what I'm goin' to do here and now? I'm goin' to shoot you, just for the hell of it. Just to see you kick."

Out of the shadows, like an uncoiled spring shot the tall form of Long Bob. His six-shooter barrel knocked the gun from the drunken man's hand. Then his two hard fists beat the man down. The man lay there, unconscious, bleeding. Long Bob, his gun in his hand, faced the half dozen men sitting around the fire.

"You saw what that loud mouthed son got, gents. Has he got any friends here that wants to take it up where he left off? Speak up and I'll accommodate you."

"Listen, big feller," said one of them, "None of us boys knows you or the little old gent with you. I know the gent you just knocked cold. I know he rode with Long Bob. I heard him call your partner a law officer. It might be healthy for both of you to keep on driftin' along the trail."

"We aim to," said Long Bob. "Not

because you and these other gents is runnin' us off, but because I don't want to have to kill that pole cat when he wakes up. Sure he rode with Long Bob. And Long Bob found out he was a coyote, so he run him off with a quirt. When he wakes up, get him to tell you about it. He'd turn Long Bob Bailey in for a plugged dime. Let's git along."

LONG BOB, at the next camp, after they had loaded their pack horses and were ready to pull out for the Montana badlands, jerked his saddle cinch tight and knotted his latigo strap. Then he faced Shorty Knight.

"Our trails divide here," he said briefly.

Shorty Knight nodded. "Figured it would be like that. So-long and good luck."

"Same to you, John Law."

Shorty Knight smiled his leathery smile. His puckered eyes were twinkling a little as he looked into the scarred face of the tall outlaw.

"They must have given you a hell of a deal down there in Old Mexico, Bob. The deal you got down there might have a bearin' on your future life."

"Meanin' just what?" asked Long Bob, his voice cold.

Shorty Knight slid his carbine into its saddle scabbard.

"I've heard it said, Bob, that those boys that used to trail with you took Hugh Tracy's word for it that you was dead. They never aimed to leave you in a tight. Hugh Tracy lied. He sold you into the *cuartel* and gave 'em a hundred pesos to kill you. Then he lifted your money and rode away."

"Where did you get that story?" asked Long Bob.

"Down in Chihuahua where it all happened. I was down there after you left."

"And you were sent down there, I reckon, to see if I was dead or alive. The law sent you down there to make sure what had become of me. You're trailin' me now, just like that gent said, aimin' to collect that ten thousand dollars bounty on my hide. Well, here's a good place to try and collect. Fill your hand."

"Easy, Bob, easy. I don't want you unless you git to raisin' hell. I'm no bounty hunter. You worked for me when you was a button. If I'd wanted you I'd have got you long ago."

Shorty Knight grinned faintly as he swung into the saddle.

"Don't lose any sleep over it, Bob. Some day mebbyso you'll savvy. And before you do anything damn foolish like gut shootin' Hugh Tracy, take a *pasear* up onto the Fort Belknap Reservation. Locate the camp of Eyes in the Water on Beaver Creek. He's an Assiniboine medicine man. He'll have news for yuh. It'll be good news, I reckon. Leastways it should be. So-long, Bob. Stay clear of trouble. Stay clear of Hugh Tracy."

STRANGE advice from a strange kind of man, that which Shorty Knight gave to Long Bob when their trails divided.

Just what, mused Long Bob, could he learn at the Injun camp on Beaver Creek where a medicine man named Eyes in the Water lived. He knew old Eyes in the Water. He had smoked with the old Indian there in his log cabin and they had become good friends. He and Cherry used to ride down there during berry season and eat their fill of service berries and wild currants. And after the first frost they would get the buffalo berries and choke cherries up on the head of Beaver Creek, making a picnic of it. That was when Long Bob was holed-up in the mountains and Cherry lived with some folks in Landusky. Those had been great days.

Long Bob had sort of trailed with the

Curry boys. They had punched cows together at the old Circle C ranch at the foot of the Little Rockies, just east of the Reservation. Those had been carefree days, with a wide open range and real cowboys who savvied cattle and horses.

It would be good to see that country once more. It would be like going home.

When he remembered Cherry his expression hardened. She had married Hugh Tracy and had gone down into the badlands somewhere near Hell Creek or Crooked Creek. Then she and Hugh had split up. They said she had run off or that he had run her off. It didn't much matter now. She had married Hugh Tracy without knowing for sure if Long Bob Bailey was dead. That was what ate into Long Bob's brain like acid. Hugh had betrayed him. Cherry had betrayed him. She was getting what was coming to her. Hugh Tracy was living on whisky, half crazy with fear. That was as it should be. They had it coming.

Then Long Bob's job of retribution would soon be finished. Then he would ride alone into the badlands, there to disappear. He would never again be seen along the outlaw trail. In some strange land, like South America, he would make a new start. He'd raise a few cattle and take life easy.

He camped alone that night. After supper, as he sat cross legged by his little campfire, smoking and sipping black coffee, he missed Shorty Knight.

Somehow Long Bob felt ashamed of himself, the way he had quit Shorty. After all he hadn't any real proof that Shorty was a law officer. A man might have given Shorty a chance to clear himself, anyhow.

Long Bob let the fire die down. Moonlight filtered through the tall pines. He took a sougan from his bed, then put a log under the blankets and covered it with a tarp. He left his hat and boots there beside the bed on the ground. With his six-shooter and carbine he took the one sougan and in his sock feet, slipped into some brush near by. Because he had been haunted all day by the notion that he was being followed.

CHAPTER SIX

Night Attack

MOONLIGHT coming down through the pine trees. The eerie cry of a hoot owl. The crack of a dry twig under a boot heel. Long Bob crouched in the bushes, his six-shooter in his hand. He could hear his two hobbled horses thump as they moved, disturbed by something.

Somewhere in the shadows near that bed a man was breathing heavily, as if he had been running and was short of breath. There sounded the click of a gun hammer being thumbed back. A moment during which that audible breathing became more labored. Then the stillness of the Montana night was torn by the roar of a gun. A shotgun. Blast after blast of buckshot tore at the tarp and blankets.

Long Bob, gun in hand, squatted on his heels in the brush, hidden by the shadows. His scarred face twisted in a terrible grin as he waited, listening to the dying echoes of that gunfire drift away in the badlands.

Now the shadowy figure of a man came from the brush, a sawed-off shotgun in his hands. His gait was none too steady. For a moment his face showed in the moonlight. He stood over the bed and deliberately emptied the gun into the tarp at a three foot range. The roar of the shotgun filled the hills. He stood there, swaying unsteadily. Then he quit the place, traveling at a half-run. The shadows swallowed him.

Long Bob put his six-shooter back in its holster and reached for tobacco and papers. He could hear the sound of shod hoofs dying in the distance. The flare of his match, as he cupped it in his hands

to light his cigarette, revealed his scarred face twisted in a sardonic grin.

Then he crushed the match flame in the palm of his hand and jerked his gun. Into that patch of moonlight where the riddled tarp-covered bed was, walked a man. A short, bowlegged man who wore a battered hat that was pulled slantwise across his seamed, leathery face. The man reached down and picked up Long Bob's shot-torn hat.

"Looks like you'll be needin' a new sombrero, Bob," he said in a soft, drawling voice. "Hugh Tracy like to ruined this 'un."

Long Bob stepped from the brush, his gun no longer in his hand. He looked down at the little old cowpuncher who held the ruined hat in his hands.

"Would you mind tellin' a man, Shorty, just when you got here and how you come to be trailin' me?"

"After I've et a bite and smoked a cigareet I'll tell you I got here before you did and slipped down from that rimrock just about dark. I'd sighted a gent trailin' you after we divided the trails. Picked him up with the glasses. I taken a short trail here, leavin' my pack horse and bed behind me. I traveled light. That's how come I got here first. Knowed you'd camp here on account of water. I watched you fix that bed up like you done. Then I watched the show."

Shorty Knight grinned his leathery grin and reached for the coffee pot. After a while Long Bob spoke.

"About how we split up back yonder, Shorty, it makes me feel mighty cheap."

"Let's forgit it, Bob. I savvy. Hell, you taken my part back yonder. That's enough. I'm just an old codger gittin' by, Bob. Mebbyso after you've had a powwow with old Eyes in the Water you'll savvy things better. You see him before you track down Hugh Tracy. Our trails will cross before long. Obliged for the coffee, pardner."

"You trailed that damned snake, thinkin' he might ketch me when I wasn't watchin'. I don't give a damn if you got a dozen badges pinned on your briskit, you are what I call a white man. I'll kill any man that says different."

Shorty Knight pinched out the lighted end of his cigarette.

"That goes double, Bob. You'll make the lodge of Eyes in the Water by tomorrow night. Then you'll savvy. So-long."

"So-long, pardner." Long Bob, his shot-torn hat in his hands, stood there, watching Shorty Knight ride away.

A FAR cry from Mexico and the Ley del Fuego to the medicine lodge of old Eyes in the Water in Montana. A long trail, any way you travel it, from Chihuahua to the Coburn Buttes there at the edge of the Fort Belknap Reservation.

Old Eyes in the Water shook hands gravely with this man with the scarred face. Then he asked him to come inside and smoke. His tepee was made of deerhide, painted with the story of the old warrior's deeds. A buffalo hunt. A horse raid on the Crows. A battle where he had killed three Crees with bow and arrow and spear. That was the medicine lodge of Eyes in the Water. That was the lodge into which walked Long Bob Bailey.

From a soft bed of blankets and fur robes showed the face of a woman. She was too white, too tired looking.

"Cherry!"

"It's mighty good to see you, Bob. Like seeing a ghost. I knew you'd come when I sent for you. After I learned for sure that you were alive. I was afraid I might die. I wanted you to know that I'd have waited a million years if I'd thought you were alive."

"You're sick, Cherry."

"I'll be all right. The baby was born dead . . . . Last night. I'm in good hands here. Where is Uncle Ed?"

"Uncle Ed?" Long Bob was squatted on his boot heels beside the bed on the ground. He was holding Cherry's hand.

"Ed Knight. Dad's brother. Uncle Ed. He promised me to fetch you here. I sent a note down the trail. The man who took it said he'd get it to Uncle Ed. There is a line camp down there. A sack of beans that is used as a post office. My note was sent there for him to pick up. He was ramrod of the outfit. Knight isn't his right name. No more than my dad's name was Smith. Uncle Ed rode the Owlhoot Trail before you were born, Bob. Then he quit. But he's a white man. He's a government stock inspector."

"You mean a cowboy detective."

"Stock inspector, Bob. I know who you think he is. You're wrong. The man who was tipping off John Law is dead. He was murdered last week at Hugh Tracy's place. He and Tracy were playing in together. Then Tracy got drunk and talked. The detective was filled full of lead and dumped in the river. Hugh Tracy did the killing. Bob, Hugh is a devil. A cold blooded, murdering snake. Bob, I. . . ."

As her voice broke in a dry sob, Long Bob took her in his arms. After a time she was quiet.

It was good to be able to find something in life to care for again. Long Bob no longer felt bitter towards her. He understood without being told. Life was good to give him Cherry once more. Life had given him Chiquita, down there in Mexico. Then death had taken her away. Some day he would tell Cherry about Chiquita. But now there was one more job to take care of before he and Cherry headed for the Argentine and a new life. That job was Hugh Tracy.

"I'll be back in a few days," he said, as he got to his feet. He hitched up his cartridge belt.

Then the flap of the tepee opened and Shorty Knight stood there, grinning his leathery grin.

"Uncle Ed!" cried Cherry.

"Howdy, young 'un. H'are yuh, Bob. Glad I got here in time to save you a ride, feller. I just come up from Crooked Crick. Fetched along a little news. Seems like some gents that had it in for Hugh Tracy bushwacked him last night. Hugh ain't never tippin' off the law any more. He's through talkin'. Thought you might want to know. Bob, I got a friend down younder in the Argentine. He's got a big spread down there and he needs the right kind of a foreman. Some gent he kin trust. A *married* man."

Long Bob Bailey looked at the little old cowpuncher. Then he held out his hand.

"I don't know the right kind of words to thank you, Shorty. Cherry might—"

Shorty Knight grinned and his blue eyes twinkled.

"Take care of her, that's all the thanks I want, Bob. Make her happy. She has it comin'. And once you're clear of this country, forgit it all."

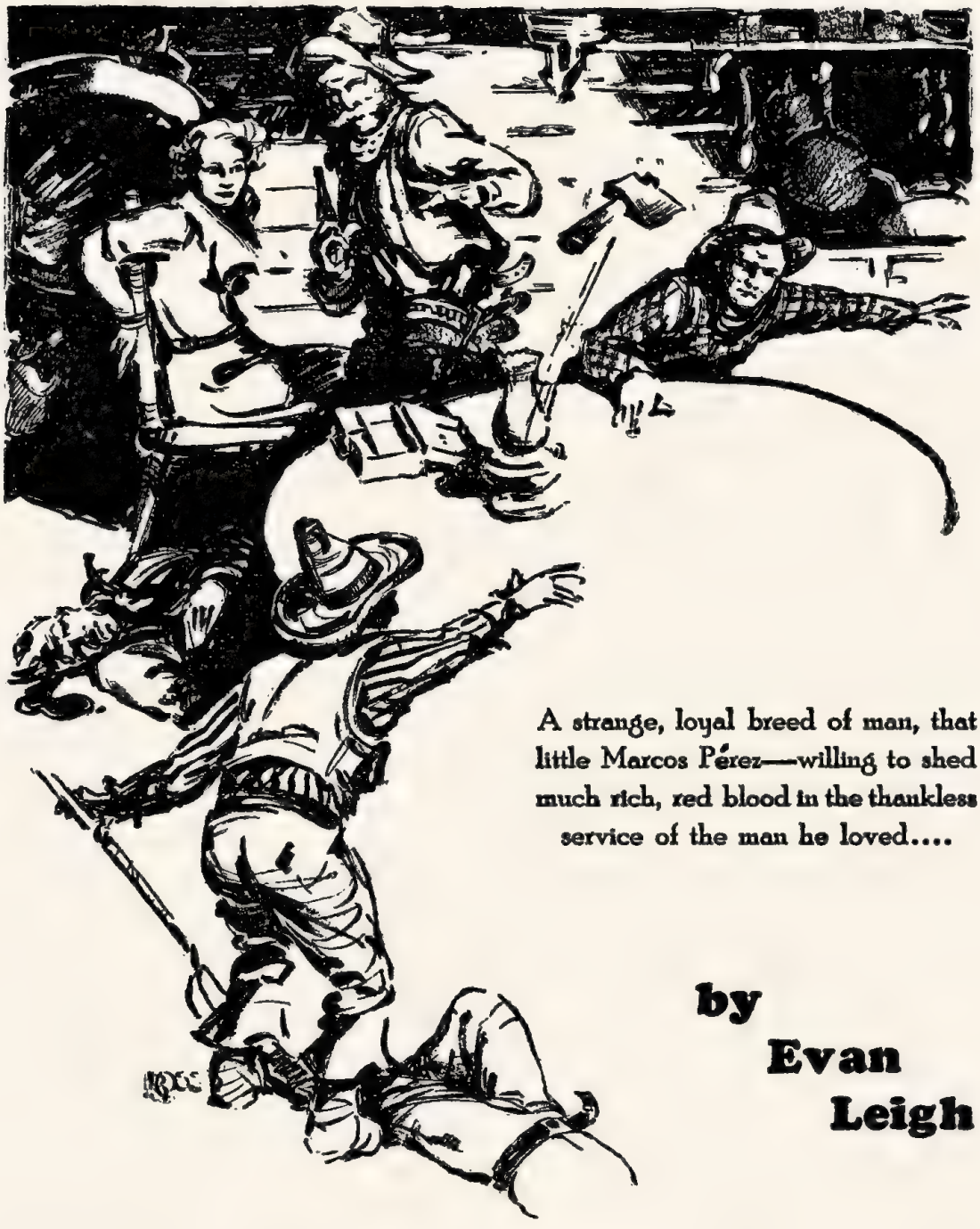
Long Bob gripped the little old cowboy's hand. In a few days, when Cherry was able to travel, he would take her away. For Long Bob Bailey had taken his last ride along the Owlhoot Trail.

Outside waited old Eyes in the Water and his squaw, wrapped in soft buckskin were two pairs of moccasins, beaded all over, even on the soles. Wedding moccasins.

THE END

A Smashing Western Novelette by
RAY NAFZIGER
In the September Issue **On Your Newsstand August 1st!**

Breed of the Border



A strange, loyal breed of man, that little Marcos Pérez—willing to shed much rich, red blood in the thankless service of the man he loved....

by Evan Leigh

HE WAS a little man—a Mexican. His face was dirty and his hair unkempt. He crouched behind the great boulder, his shoulders hunched, and shivered as the rain drizzled into his collar and down his skinny back. He squinted as a flash of lightning streaked the sky, turning the blackness of the early

morning hours into a garish half-daylight.

"María! Qué noche!" he muttered through the rain on his lips. "What a night!" But he did not move into the lee of the boulder. He sat there in the downpour, wet, cold, cramped, watching the narrow pass with shiny little black eyes.

It was a bad night for a man to be out. Especially it was bad for Marcos Pérez, who was famous for sitting beside a warm wall, drinking in the sunshine, and smoking innumerable brown-paper quirlies. And he had been here a long time, waiting in the cold, pre-dawn drizzle. . . .

A sloshing miniature thunder of hoofs thudded above him on the trail, and Marcos Pérez instinctively shifted his position, for that sound signaled the end of his lonely vigil. A half-dozen longhorns, tossing their heads, puddled into the gap. Slouched on slippery horses, four riders came into sight. The first one slapped the sleepy, unruly dogies into line, and herded them through the pass.

Marcos Pérez pulled his battered hogleg from its holster. *"Adónde vas?"* he shrilled in his high falsetto. "Where are you going?"

The man on horseback did not stop to bandy words. He jerked at his own six-gun and fired at the voice in the syrupy gloom. Six lead bullets. One of them gouged a furrow across Marcos' ribs. The others flattened into thin disks on the side of the boulder.

Marcos Pérez emptied his gun in turn. None of his bullets came near the man on the horse. Pérez did not really expect that they would. He was a notoriously poor shot. He knew he could not shoot worth a damn with a revolver.

But all the time he was shooting, he splashed through the mud toward the man on horseback, dragging at his knife with his left hand. He knew how to use that.

The other three riders bunched at the top of the grade, hesitant. Then, with a shout of frightened alarm, they turned their mounts and spurred them cruelly.

The rider near Marcos gave a sharp scream of frustration. He hurled his six-gun. It bounced off Pérez' chest, snapped a couple of ribs. Then he threw himself off his horse and at the drenched little Mexican. In the sudden brightness of a flash of lightning, a gleaming blade showed also in his hand.

They circled awkwardly in the tricky gumbo of the trail. Around and around, slowly, like two banty roosters. Pérez lunged in a feint. The other man closed.

Then, in the half-light, Pérez saw his opening. His blade darted forward like a frightened rabbit.

The other man screamed, with horror and surprise. Convulsively, he threw his knife far away from him in a high arc. As his scream rose to its piercing highest note, he straightened to his tiptoes. Then his knees caved, abruptly, and he crumpled on his face, his head thudding dully on a rock in the middle of the slushy trail.

Marcos Pérez bent over the body, ripped something from it. Then he tottered to the boulder, leaned weakly against it for a moment, and slid down the face of the big rock to lie at the foot of it in a crablike sprawl.

The pinto, which had trotted down the trail a few rods into the open mesa, whinnied mournfully. The six big steers, still in line, began to browse off the sparse, scraggly clumps of grass. The lightning flared monotonously, and the rain slashed down from the heavens. In the distance, a ketch dog wailed like a lost soul in hell. It was cold. Three o'clock. Two hours before dawn. Drizzling.

JED ROBBINS, Marcos Pérez' boss, rode onto the scene early the next

morning. Marcos was still at the foot of the boulder, lying there glass-eyed, half dead from loss of blood. The man in the trail was very dead indeed. The horse, nervous and skittish, twitched its nostrils and neighed as Robbins rode up. The steers had spread out across the mesa as they grazed.

Robbins whistled shrilly to his riders and climbed off his roan. He poured water from his canteen into the purple lips, and was rubbing the bloodless, cold hands when the rest of the boys came to his side.

"This here banty rooster has done been in a cock-fight," Robbins drawled, with a little note of anxiousness in his voice. "He didn't win by very much."

"By enough," a sandy-haired, gangling cowhand mused. "The other hombre's sure enough crow-bait." He swayed across the trail on his high-heeled boots and saddle-bent legs, tugged at the dead man's shoulder, and rolled him stiffly onto his back. Then he gasped.

"Hey, this is Miguel!" he shouted. "This is Marcos' brother!"

Marcos' deep, soft-brown eyes fluttered open. *"Sí!"* he hissed weakly. *"Es* Miguel. It is my brother."

"What the hell?" Robbins questioned. "You killed him?"

Marcos nodded feebly. "He steal cows. I fix him."

"God!" Jed Robbins swore. "I don't pay you to kill your own brother. Not for a few head of cattle."

Marcos did not understand much English. He nodded again. *"Sí!* I fix. That one time those steer he would gore me—you remember? It was *adiosita* for me, till you save me. So Marcos Pérez pays the debt." His eyes were eloquent. *"Por la honra de la familia.* For the honor of the family. You *sabe, señor?"*

Then he fainted again.

* * *

Young Mrs. Jed Robbins could not tolerate Mexicans. Burned in her mind like a brand was the scene which had happened six months before when she was visiting her father. The old man owned the Box-Kite spread in northern Sonora. Then that day the crew of dirty, swaggering bandits descended on the place.

She remembered how her father confronted the leader, ordering him to leave. She remembered how the grimy leader dismounted from his sweaty, froth-flecked sorrel, walked toward her father with a smile on his face, and, flicking out a long *navaja,* cut the old man's throat as they stood there in the corral. The white beard turned red.

It was only the fact that Lu, the faithful Chinese cook, hid her in an osier clothes-hamper that saved her from being the victim of a Roman holiday like Lolita, whose agonized screams still tortured Mrs. Robbins' dreams.

Jed and his hands rescued her, and gave her father a decent burial, but from that day, the sight of a Mexican made her flesh crawl. And naturally, she tried to persuade Jed to dismiss all his Mexican hands.

So when her husband rode up to the ranch-house with Marcos Pérez' limp, puny body in his arms, Mrs. Robbins had that feeling of revulsion. The skin under the bun at the nape of her neck tightened, and she bit her underlip. But she tried to be brave.

"What happened to him?" she asked, trying to keep the distaste out of her voice.

"Couple of busted ribs. Creased side. Some assorted knife wounds. Loss of blood."

Mrs. Robbins saw an opportunity. "Just like a greasy Mexican," she said. "I knew he was a worthless creature. Now, will you get rid of him? Him and his surly brother?"

"You don't have to worry about the brother any more," Jed said softly.

"Why?"

"He's dead."

"Oh, so he finally got killed in some *cantina* brawl?" Mrs. Robbins gibed, almost gleefully.

Robbins looked from the gaunt, tiny Mexican in his arms up to the young woman on the porch. "No," he answered slowly. "Not a brawl. Marcos killed him for running a few steers through the pass."

The woman's smile vanished. "Oh!"

"Fix up a place for him in the north ell, will you?"

Mrs. Robbins stiffened. "In our house? And I suppose I should nurse him, too, like a long-lost son?"

"Maybe," Jed replied. "We'll be lucky if we have sons like him. Now fix up that room in a hurry, will you?"

MARCOS PÉREZ was not fooled. As he lay between the clean white sheets, he felt that they had been given to him grudgingly. When Mrs. Robbins —young and beautiful—came in to wash him and dress his wounds, she acted as if she were giving a bath to a disgusting, sniveling Pekingese. Her roughness made his ribs throb, made his head swim. And when she came in with his food, the grim, set lines on her face took away his appetite.

"No es bueno," he told Robbins when the rancher came in to see him. "It's not good. You should have left me in the bunkhouse. *La señora,* she does not like me."

Jed laughed, and tried to cover the empty feeling in the pit of his stomach. His wife was snapping little daggers of criticism at him every time she got the chance. Just a pointed word or two. He tried desperately to make her see the situation clearly. She was very stubborn, very bitter.

"Probably was in on that rustling himself," she suggested. "He'll think he's a god, now that a white woman has washed his filthy face and hands."

By the time Pérez was up and around again, Jed was licked. He called the Mexican over to the gate in the corral. "Marcos," he began, "you did a fine thing. You were a heap more loyal than I'd have been." He paused to find some way to break the news gently.

"Es nada, señor," Marcos assured him. "It's nothing."

"But I'm afraid you'll have to leave the ranch now, Marcos. . . ." A hurt look crept into the little man's eyes. Robbins added hurriedly, "It's not that your work hasn't been all right. I can't explain."

"Si, señor," Marcos returned meekly. "I understand. *La señora,* she does not like me." The emotional Mexican's voice sounded cracked and raw. Robbins stood there silently, watching his own foot idly kick a piece of discarded harness.

"Can I have the one big favor, *señor?"* Marcos said slowly.

"Sure," Robbins replied in a very low voice.

"Can I stay in the deserted *casucha* by the spring?"

Jed Robbins pictured the ramshackle, deserted shack, with its dilapidated sod roof and cracked 'dobe walls. The nests of rattlers who made it their home. The countless lizards and spiders. The sneaking desert rats. "Sure, if you want to stay on Star-in-a-Circle land that bad, you're plumb welcome. I'll send you beans and flour. Butcher a calf when you need it."

"Gracias, señor," Marcos said gratefully. *"Gracias infinitas.* I have the *dinero* saved. You need not bother over me."

Ten minutes later Marcos had gathered

up his meager belongings in the bunkhouse. He threw a saddle on his ribby pony and rode away, dwindling into the distance toward the spring.

"He's gone," Jed told his wife. "He's going to live in that tumbledown hut by the spring."

"On our land?" she shrilled. "Why didn't you send him clear away? You'll lose more critters than ever now."

"Hush, woman," Jed groaned. "Hush up and don't talk no more." He buried his head in his lean fingers. "I feel like a yaller dog."

MARCOS PÉREZ was very busy. He was making a large cross. He fitted two heavy beams of wood together, and fastened the joint tightly. Then he picked up a bit and auger, bored a deep hole in the end of the upright arm of the cross. A few feet away, a small fire blazed.

From around his waist, the little Mexican took a heavy money-belt. It was filled with large gold coins, and Marcos poured all the golden disks from it into a pudgy pot.

"I know not whence you come," Marcos murmured to the coins in Spanish, "and I cannot return you to your true owners. But I—" he paused—"I shall give you to God. To ease my brother's soul in Purgatory."

Then he squatted over the fire, and began to melt the coins. A subtle, almost happy smile flickered across his dark face.

When the bottom of the pot was covered with a gleaming yellow liquid, he hurried over to the cross and poured the molten gold into the hole he had bored. A puff of smoke popped out as the hot metal charred the wood. The arm of the cross was warm where his hand held it.

Marcos whistled a bar from a popular *jota,* sat on his heels, and started to whittle another piece of wood. It became round, about six inches long. After a bit, he held it out, looked at it, and grinned as if pleased.

He stuck the end in the hole which hid the gold, nodded when he saw it was a close fit, picked up his hammer, and pounded it even with the end of the arm. Then he leaned the cross against the 'dobe wall.

The little Mexican next brought out a can of paint, brushed the cross with it very carefully. When it was all covered with the bronze-colored coating, he leaned the cross against the wall again, washed the brush with turpentine, tapped the lid back on the can, and smiled.

The next morning, Marcos Pérez was standing in front of the Church of the Bleeding Heart. It was a typical Mission building. The thick adobe walls were rough and gray, etched by time. Above the front wall was an arch, from which a broken timber pointed at the sky. It was at this timber that Marcos was looking.

A fat little *padre* stood beneath the arch. In one hand, he held a book from which he read, muttering his Latin in a low monotonous voice. With the other hand, he fingered the heavy silver crucifix which hung from his neck. He wore the white robe of the Dominican Order. His hood was pushed down around his neck, and his shaven pate shone in the sunlight.

He put a bookmark in his place when Marcos approached, and smiled genially.

"Buenos días, padre," Marcos said.

"Good morning also to you, my child," the *cura* replied.

For a moment they stood there, silent, while the *padre* looked at the heavy cross which Marcos bore on his shoulder. At last the Mexican spoke.

"For many months our church needs a new cross, Father."

"Alas, that is so," Father Augustine answered quietly.

"I, Marcos Pérez, give the church a new cross." His tone was a little proud.

"As a part penitence for the killing of my brother, though he was a bad man."

Father Augustine smiled. He fingered his crucifix for a moment; then he said: "Repentance is good. Forgiveness lies in the grace of God."

"I give it," Marcos repeated.

The *padre* nodded.

AFTER the new cross stood proudly over the Church of the Bleeding Heart, Marcos Pérez plastered up the cracks in his shack. He evicted the loathesome inhabitants he found in it, and spread a clean layer of desert sand on the floor. He patched the roof and put new sod on it.

He had drawn his money out of the bank, brought home his provisions for the winter. Now he went about his business.

There was the morning when Robbins learned that someone was chopping the ice out of the spring each morning so that the cattle could drink there. One morning a small herd of maverick stuff was standing in the ranch-yard, bound by a rope corral, when the Star-in-a-Circle boys piled out of the bunkhouse. Wolves, which had formerly come marauding from the hills, fell into wily traps which Marcos Pérez set in the footlands.

Then one late afternoon Marcos trudged through the snow, heading into the sleety wind toward his cabin. He was inside before he realized that someone else was there. Three men, strangers, sat in the hut.

One was a white-haired old man, with a shiny clean face, and sweeping silver mustachios. One was a little gringo with thin lips and furtive eyes. The third was almost a giant, a huge man with vacant blue eyes and knotty finger-joints. They sat looking at Marcos as he swung his pile of traps to the floor.

"My son," the venerable old man purred in the low, sonorous tones of a bishop, "we have been looking for you. We have come to pay you a little visit. I hope you don't mind this unseemly intrusion?"

"Something I can do for you?" Pérez asked in his quiet, smooth voice.

"If you would be so kind," the old man said. "Would you object to providing us with a little sustenance? Nourishment? In other words, food?"

"What th' hell, Deacon!" the small man growled, toying with the greasy black butt of a Colt .45. "Let's get down to business and get out of here."

"Refrain!" the old man ordered regally. Then he turned to Marcos again. "The food first, please, my child."

"Sí, señor," Marcos answered. He turned to the corner of his tiny hut, lit the fire in the stove, and put the rice, beans, and coffee on the fire to warm. The three men sat watching him silently. The little Mexican set the food on the table, laid out plates and knives and forks. "So, *señores.* Will you please accept what simple hospitality I can offer?"

The three of them dragged the chair and two empty packing boxes to the rickety table. "What, no meat?" the small man snarled. "Are you holdin' out on us, you little black devil?"

"Stop it!" the white-haired man commanded. "Curb your angry tongue." And then to Marcos, "Have you no flesh, my boy?"

"I have a little—what you call him?—salt pork," Marcos answered.

"Then kindly fry it up, and please make plenty of gravy."

"Sí, señor." Marcos unwrapped his stock of meat, a quarter pound of salt pork, and sliced it. Then he began to fry it in a skillet. He made the gravy and set it on the table.

"Hellish grub," the big vacant-eyed man muttered.

"Yeah," the man with the thin lips agreed, "these damned Mexicans are like

Chinks. They kin live on chicken feed."

Marcos went back to his corner and began to eat a little of the food which he had set aside for himself.

"Hey, what the hell are you doin', you lousy greaser?" the small man roared.

"Just eating a little too," Marcos explained patiently.

"So you're holdin' out on us, eh?" the blue-eyed giant thundered. "Bring it over here. There ain't enough for us as it is."

Marcos tried to be reasonable. He choked down his anger. "But *señores,* I have hunger also. I have walked far today, and have eaten nothing."

"I suggest you bring it over," the old man said. "No one really cares if a greaser goes hungry."

"How about gettin' down to business now?" the small man growled. "How come this low-down Mex has enough dough to stock up for the winter? Got some money, you squirt?"

Marcos Pérez answered truthfully, *"Sí, señor.* I have saved some *dinero."*

"Bring it here, please," the white-haired man directed.

"A loan, maybe? You are a poor man, perhaps?"

"Greaser, we want that coin you took off your brother Miguel's body," the small, furtive-eyed man grumbled. "We was his pardners. We know you got it."

MARCOS PÉREZ walked over to his bunk, pulled out his canvas money-bag. The white-haired man took it out of his hands as he approached the table again. He ripped open the tie-cords, and dumped the contents on the table. Perhaps thirty-five American dollars clattered out. "Where's the rest, my son?" he questioned in his deep, genteel voice.

Marcos shrugged. "That is all I have."

"My child," the kind faced old man replied, "I warn you not to deceive us. We know that Miguel had money with him—a great deal of money."

"That is all I have," Marcos answered, stubbornly and truthfully.

The man with the silver mustachios turned away without saying a word. He began to divide the coins, one to each man. The extra ones he kept for himself. Neither of the others argued with him. Without speaking, they finished their meal.

"May I wash the dishes now?" Marcos asked.

"What unseemly haste you show, my boy," the old man complained. "Are we burdensome? Do you wish us to go?"

"No, *los señores* are very welcome here," Marcos replied meekly.

"We'd better be." The little man's piggish eyes squinted. "Now how about it, Deacon? Shall we get down to business?"

"I suppose that is advisable," the venerable old man said. "Now, my son, where is that money which Miguel had?"

Marcos squirmed under the other man's almost kindly gaze. "I do not have it, *señor."*

"Then Jed Robbins has it?"

"No, *señor,* he knows nothing of it."

The small man interrupted. "Come on. Quit stallin'. Where's that dough?"

Marcos Pérez shivered at the thought of the jovial little *padre* in the hands of these men—at the thought of the secret in the cross over the Church of the Bleeding Heart. He drew himself up to his full five feet. "I am so very sorry, *señores,* but I cannot tell."

The white-haired man fixed him with his quiet brown eyes. "You won't tell?"

"No."

Suddenly the acting was over. The comedy ended and the tragedy began. The white-haired old man clutched at Marcos and bellowed out, "Why, you warty little horn toad, you! Grab him, boys!"

Marcos Pérez was a little man. The three gringos pinned him to the floor without a struggle.

"Yank off his boots!" the old man snarled. The boots came off. The old man's kindly-seeming mouth twisted into a cruel gash on his face. He picked up a candle by the bunk, lighted it. "Now, by God, you'll learn to say 'No!' my little man."

The biggest man pressed Marcos to the floor. The small man held up Marcos' foot. The white-haired man held the candle to it. The thick woolen stocking flamed, charred, and floated away in gray ashes. Tears streaked down the little Mexican's cheeks, leaving cleaner lines on his face. The flesh on his foot blistered, broke, gave off a sickening, sweetish smell. Marcos bit his lips until his chin was covered with blood.

"Will you tell us where that money is now?" the old man snarled.

"No! No! A thousand times, no!"

"Stubborn cuss," the small, thin-lipped man growled. "Try the other foot. There ain't no feeling left in this one by now."

They lifted the other foot, keeping Marcos pinioned to the floor.

"No!" Marcos shrieked. "No! No! No!"

"You'll tell?"

"No! Mother of God! No! No! No!"

"I guess he won't," the big, blue-eyed man said at last. Marcos lay on the floor, unconscious now, twitching. "Shall I put him out of his misery?"

"No need," the old man replied. "He won't go nowhere. We'll have to get that money ourselves."

"I guess we can," the rat-eyed one laughed. He patted his holster.

"Gritty customer, though," the leader mused. "Wonder if he held out on us anyway? Damn the little black devil!"

MARCOS PÉREZ struggled to consciousness through waves of pain. His feet throbbed. The men who had tortured him were gone. The door of the 'dobe hut was hanging open, and a tiny drift of snow showed in the doorway like the head of some timid wild thing.

Marcos started. Those three men! Even though they were strangers, they would be able to find Jed Robbins' place. They would plod through the howling storm until they came to it. They would rob the boss. Marcos tried to fight his way up from the floor. He had no idea how much of a start they had. It was murky outside now—evening. He crawled to his knees, made an attempt to stand, and fell to the floor again.

For a moment he sat there, shivering and sick, thinking. Then he crawled to a small box in the corner of the room, and pulled out some rags. Bits of old underwear, the tattered shreds of a cast-off blanket. Pieces of flour sacks, and a couple of woe-begone bath towels.

With these he began to bandage his burned feet. He put great wads of material around them, tied the rags in place with strings and strips of cloth.

His six-gun was gone, but that did not worry him very much. He knew that he was a poor shot with a short gun. He felt the long, keen knife at his belt, smiled grimly, and flung himself into the swirling tempest of the storm.

For a long time afterward, men sitting in bunkhouses and around campfires talked of Marcos Pérez and his journey into the night. It was only a little more than two miles, but he managed most of it on his hands and knees, inching along, crippled and broken. The few times he managed to stagger to his feet and walk were marked by bloody footprints in the soft new snow. Many times he fell, too weak to stand, and lay whimpering in the drifts, becoming covered and hidden by the fluttering flakes. Then he drove himself on again.

It was quite dark when he finally dragged himself into Jed Robbins' ranch-yard. There were no lights in the bunk-house. The hands were all in Pinta for the dance. But there were lights in the kitchen windows of the ranch-house.

Marcos squirmed to the toolhouse and grabbed the closest weapons, a long-handled pitchfork and a small hatchet. Dragging them beside him, he made his way to the porch, peered in the window.

Jed Robbins and his wife were there. And as Marcos had guessed, the three men who had tortured him were there. Jed lay slumped on the floor, with an ugly welt on the back of his head dripping blood onto his forehead and down the bridge of his nose.

Mrs. Robbins was tied clumsily in a chair. The flimsy tin strong-box in which Robbins kept his money and papers was on the table, most of its contents strewn over the floor. The white-haired old man was pointing his revolver carelessly at Mrs. Robbins. The other two men were arguing angrily.

In the howling storm, Marcos could not hear what they were saying. Probably he would not have understood anyway. He understood very little English. But one of the men jerked a thumb at the woman, and Marcos got the idea.

He tottered gingerly to his tender feet, leaned against the wall at the side of the doorway, and hammered twice on the door with the head of the hatchet.

ONCE in every man's life comes a moment when he can stand up, take his life in his hands, and make a hero of himself. Some men have a couple of flings at it. A few poor devils muff it when it comes.

But not Marcos Pérez, Mexican *vaquero,* five feet tall and standing on cracked, burnt feet. He gripped the hatchet in his half-frozen fingers and waited. The loud voices inside the kitchen choked off immediately. There was a lull in the storm as if the god who watches men was looking on. The door swung open suddenly, and the big man with the vacant blue eyes stepped through the doorway onto the storm-swept porch.

Marcos struck with the flat of the hatchet. The man gasped a small moan, and crumpled to his knees, swayed a moment, and plunged forward on his face. Marcos gritted his teeth, and stepped through the doorway into the room.

There were three startled sounds. Jed's wife said, "Oh!" The rat-eyed man said, "Damn!" The old man said, "Hell's fire!" Then the latter two turned their short guns on the little Mexican, squeezing on the triggers.

Marcos Pérez lifted his bloody axe, hurled it at the nearest man, the small one with the thin lips and the furtive eyes. It struck him squarely on his chest, sharp-edge foremost, and bit deep before it fell clattering to the floor. Frothy bubbles of blood floated on his lips. He twisted and fell on the uneven planking.

Bullets from the old man's revolver, meanwhile, were twitching at Marcos' body. One pounded into his shoulder, pushed him back like a strong hand. The little Mexican grabbed the pitchfork and hurled it like a spear. The white-haired man ducked and thumbed new shells into his .44. The pitchfork sailed over his bent shoulders, planted itself deep in the wall behind him, and quivered up and down.

The man with the silver mustachios looked surprised, afraid, and started to fire again, wildly. Marcos Pérez felt his right side grow numb. He tugged at his knife with his left hand, and clutching the blade, walked on into the frantic fusillade. With a startled scream, the old man pitched his empty gun at Marcos, stepped back. He had never seen a man facing

such odds, so crippled and wounded, keep asking for more, and it frightened and rattled him. The gun missed Marcos.

The taller man shrieked, tried to whirl away. Marcos reached out once, swiftly, deftly, with the gleaming knife. And as Jed Robbins' wife watched, both men slumped to the floor.

Mrs. Robbins strained against her loose bonds, broke free. She flew across the kitchen to where Jed lay on the floor, moaning weakly. She fell on her knees beside him and shook him roughly, frantically. "Jed! Jed! Wake up! Marcos has been hurt. Go get the team! I'll do what I can. Go get the team!"

Jed groaned softly, his head lolling as his wife tried to shake him into consciousness. He opened his eyes slowly, comprehended slowly. Finally he rose to his feet and staggered through the door, past the corpse on the porch, toward the barn.

On the floor, Marcos forced his eyes open, smiled. He shook his head painfully from side to side, managed to speak. "Not necessary, *señora.* I think I die. It is all right. You know, *señora. Por la honra. . . .*"

"Don't be a fool!" Mrs. Robbins snapped; but she was sobbing and there was tenderness in her voice. She tore off Marcos' shirt and started to staunch his wounds. "Don't be as big a fool as I was, Marcos Pérez."

And when Jed reeled back into the room gasping, "I hitched 'em," it was Mrs. Jed Robbins, Mexican hater, who drew Marcos' thin bloody arm across her shoulder, who half-carried him to the wagon, and who picked up the reins for the mad drive through the night to the doctor.

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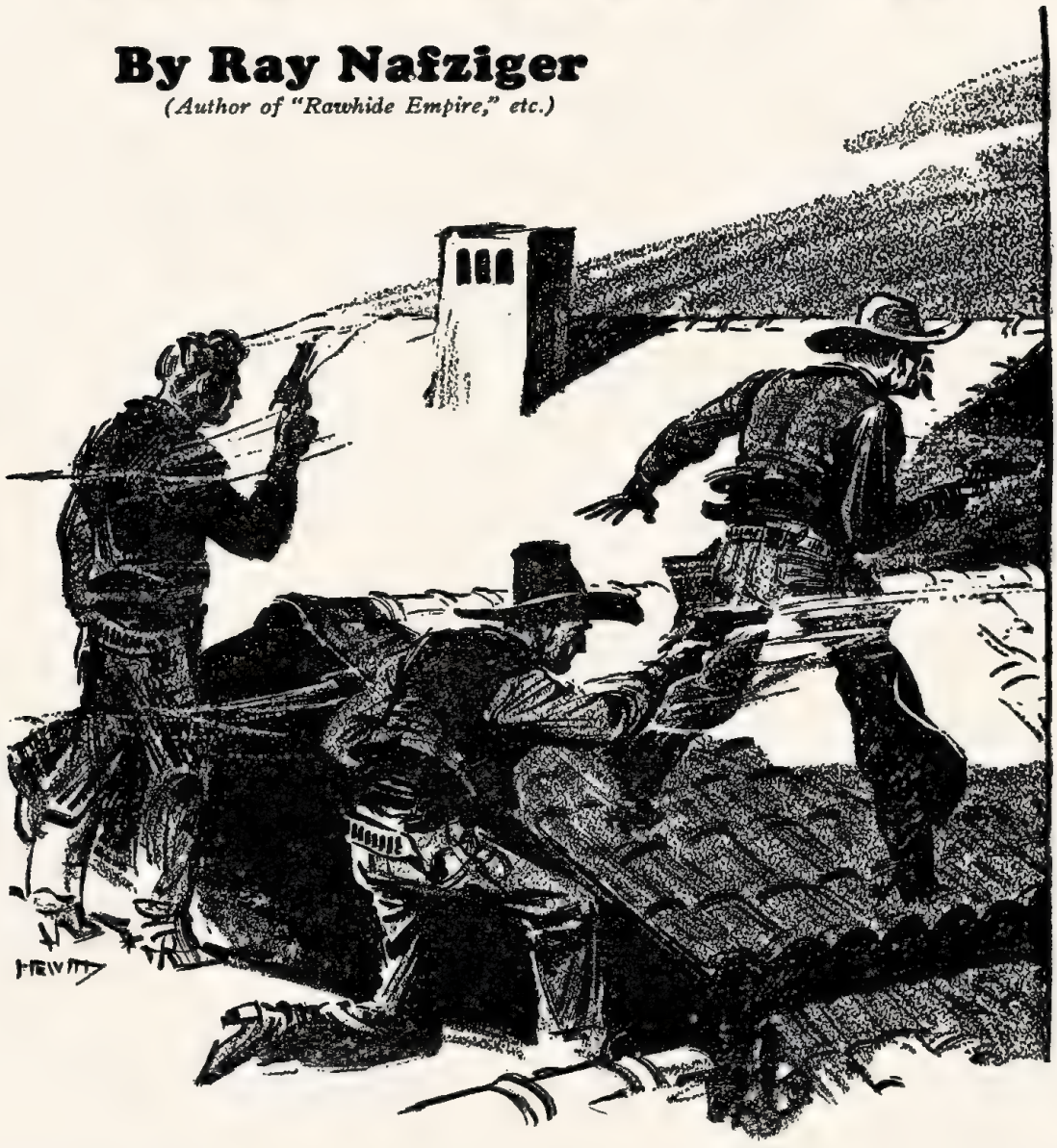
THE TRAIL OF

By Ray Nafziger

(Author of "Rawhide Empire," etc.)



Death—and the law—rode hard behind these grim renegades when their last chip had been played and lost. So they determined to go out in a shower of sparks and powder-smoke, until an oath made to a dying man gave them something for which to live —and fight!

NIGHT, and a rain that pelted the flat dirt roofs of old Tucson. A man with a crippled, twisted body pushed open the wooden door in an adobe wall at the back of an old house near the tracks. For a long minute he surveyed the dark court, closed by rooms on three sides. Light from the windows of one

THE TRAIL OF DOOMED MEN

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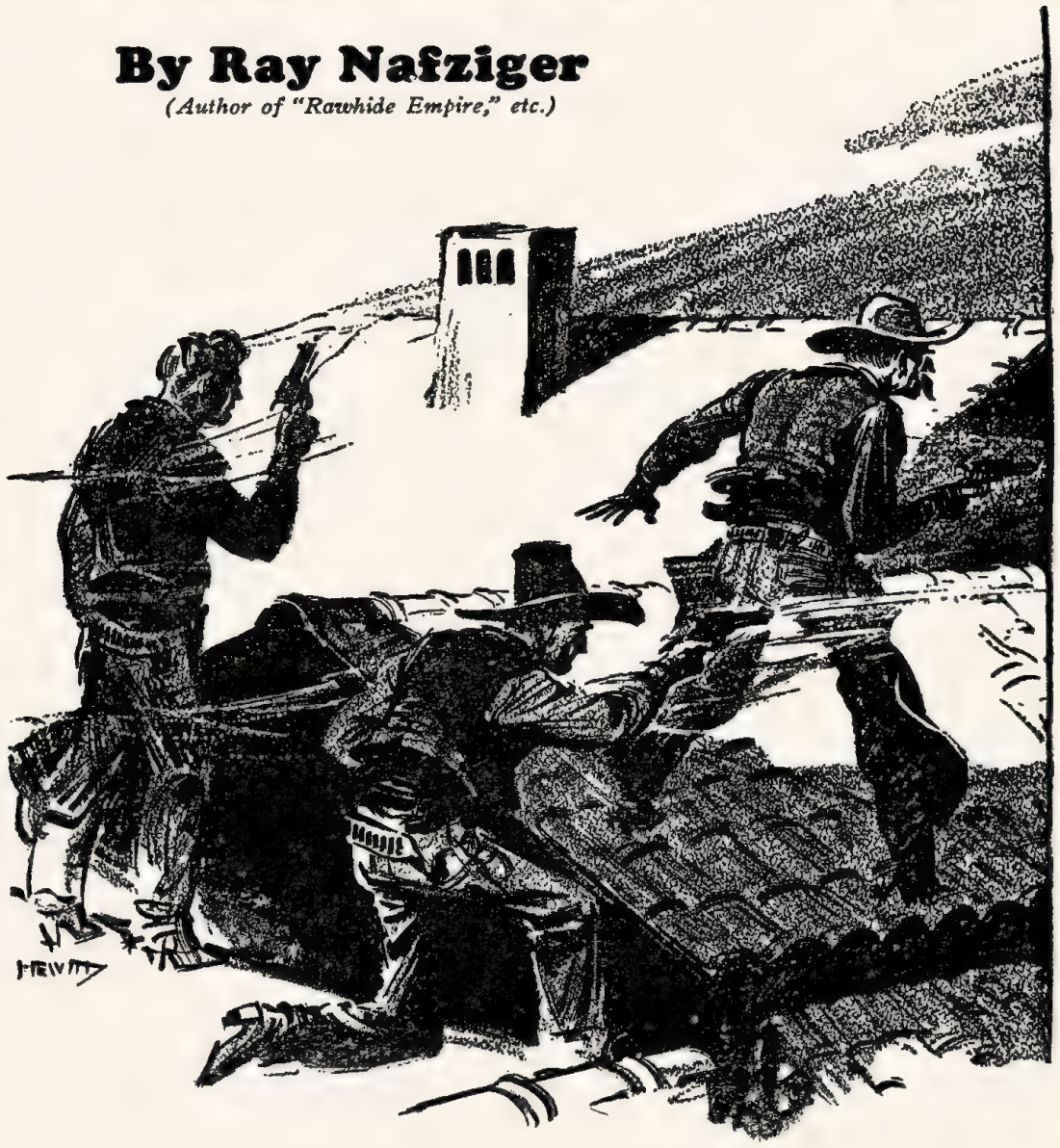

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Complete Novelette of the Border

room threw a yellow splotch on the wet courtyard. Keeping within the shadows, the man dragged an almost useless leg toward the lighted room.

He had heard that nearly every night there was a poker game in this house. Through the windows and door which opened into the court he could hear the faint click of chips. Peering through a corner of the uncurtained window, he saw a round table with five men sitting about it.

The cold and wet penetrating his worn range clothing made him shiver, but the bills and silver in front of the banker of the game warmed him. There, ready for the taking, lay the money which would buy the things a busted-up bronc rider could no longer earn.

One man, his face dark, lean, emotionless, would be the banker of the game, and to him the intruder paid particular attention. He had heard about this Jeff Halliday, who rented the old adobe house here. A hard-looking, dangerous fellow with restless eyes. A good man to look out for.

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From his pocket the man in the shadows

brought out a red neckerchief with eye-slits and tied it under his smudged sombrero. Next, he produced a gun from under his soaked jumper.

Yes, he'd have to watch Jeff Halliday close when he stepped inside the room. The rest, all city men, from the looks of them, would be easy. Slowly through the rain he moved to the door, big powerful fingers clamped on the gun butt. . . .

A hard man, Jeff Halliday who was still in his thirties, but had lived a life counting more desperate years than most men could count moments. His thin raw-boned face in which deep-blue restless eyes burned with a hard light, made most men uneasy. They disliked Halliday at sight, because secretly they feared him and what he could do to them, should they cross him. But when they really knew Jeff Halliday, they liked him. Below the bleak, hard surface was a man who could be counted on to wade through hell for a friend.

The hardness was a shell that covered a vast pity for men who had run into misfortune. Since he had been a top-hand on a big Oklahoma ranch at fifteen he had seen many men killed and hurt—ripped to pieces by bullets in range wars and Mexican uprisings, crippled by bad horses and tangled ropes. . . .

He himself had not escaped injuries in riding a dozen different ranges below and above the Border. Old gun-shot wounds that had never healed had finally laid him up. He had come to Tucson to take medical treatment, but during two years his body had steadily wasted away. His doctor gave him six months to live.

Neighbors had complained of the thin-featured man who lived in the big old adobe shack by the Southern Pacific tracks. They claimed that his house harbored criminals, that with Halliday at times lived as many as a dozen desperate men. Which was true.

Such men had lived with Halliday during his two years in Tucson, men at the end of their ropes—brought there by starvation or ill health. Health-seekers mostly, found by Halliday coughing in doorways or lying feebly in the sun. Gruffly Halliday had invited them to his house for a drink or a meal, and they had stayed for short or long periods, to sleep in the rooms of the big adobe house, to eat at his table which an old Mexican who would have sold his soul for Halliday, kept supplied with food.

Some died there, with Halliday by their beds; some had lain long hours in the sunny court, rested, ate and fought back to health. None had ever paid him a dollar or said a word of thanks; the only pay Halliday ever asked was that they should keep their gratitude to themselves.

IT was this man that the intruder who had dragged his crippled big-framed body into the courtyard, proposed to hold up. The game was not running high tonight but what there was of it had run steadily against Halliday as it had for weeks. He gambled without a house percentage; his pride would not allow him to depend on anything other than his skill. By it, for two years, he had made a fair living for himself and the men who stayed with him.

The door let in a cold draft, and the players saw a ragged wet figure of a man in the doorway, with a slitted neckerchief over his face. A crippled fellow whose clothing from his worn high-heeled boots to the flop-brimmed, smoke-smudged sombrero, was patched and dilapidated. Even the single-action revolver he carried with the dull lead cartridge ends visible, was a battered shooting weapon, as ugly as its purpose.

The masked man moved the gun so that it covered alternately each man. "Up!" he ordered gruffly. They obeyed, both get-

ting to their feet and raising their hands shoulder-high. Halliday obeyed with the rest, shifting his feet a little to the side. The man, dragging his leg, slowly came to the table and with a wave of the gun, directed them back to the wall. A man of few words and probably a man of few bullets also, since he wore no cartridge belt.

"Take it easy, cowboy," drawled Halliday, who wanted an excuse to lag behind, so that he would be the nearest of the five men to the pile of money on the table before his chair. "Don't let that cannon go off by accident. What there is of it is all yours."

There was a slight warning movement of the gun toward Halliday, and then the bandit with his left hand started awkwardly to pick up the pile of money, slowly stuffing the bills into his jumper pocket. Meanwhile his cold blue eyes never wavered from the five men.

Most of that money belonged to his guests, and Halliday didn't intend to have guests robbed in his house. Because the bandit was paying more attention to the men before him than to transferring the pile of greenbacks from the table to his pocket, a bill fluttered from his thick fingers and floated to the floor. Instinctively the man stooped to snatch at the bill, and for a flashing second the barrel of his weapon lowered. Then, realizing that he had momentarily dropped his guard, he hastily jerked up the gun.

He was too late. Halliday had already leaped. Both his hands gripped the forearm of the man's gun hand; bore down. The wrist of the bandit was like iron, but Halliday managed to get the ball of his thumb under the firing pin of the cocked weapon and keep it there while he struggled with the intruder, their feet scraping across the floor as they fought for the gun.

No one helped Halliday. His move had caught the others by surprise; paralyzed, incapable of action, they stood helplessly watching the fighting men.

Halliday knew that he was in no condition to last long against a man as strong as the bandit. He took advantage of the crooked leg which he guessed was weak and tripped the man up. As they hit the floor, Halliday, who had been trained in the rough-and-tumble school of the Border, sank his teeth into the thick wrist so ferociously until blood spurted that the man dropped the gun.

As the two rolled over, locked in each other's arms, one of the four grabbed the weapon from the floor. Then they all flung themselves on the crippled man. The one with the gun did an unnecessary thing; he knocked the bandit out, using the six-shooter as a club, bringing it crashing on the soiled sombrero.

The neckerchief had been torn from the man's face, the face of a youngish fellow, blue-eyed with skin that had been baked red by the sun. His left arm and one leg were twisted. A wide belt of leather was laced about his middle, evidently as a support for some internal injury.

He was not staying out long and when Halliday poured a drink down his throat, he snapped awake.

"I'll call the marshal," said the man who held the gun. "The bum! Thinking he could get away with holding us up!"

"He came damn near it," said one of the others dryly. "I always heard you had nerve, Halliday. I know it now. We'll turn the buzzard over to the law."

"Wait a minute," said Halliday. "He's no bum. The marshal's in no special hurry for him." He stooped over the man who now sat up on the floor. "Saw you ride at Nogales once. Hurt lately, weren't you, at a rodeo in Texas? Seems to me I heard of that."

The man grunted. "Hurt, yes. What's

it to you, you devil?" He got to his feet still groggy, and stood glaring at Halliday.

In alarm one of the men hastily grabbed up the gun from the table, but Halliday took the weapon, examined it, and grinned.

"Take it easy, fella," he told the bandit gruffly. "We got a little ham and eggs in the house. Guess that's what you need. And a few drinks to dry out that soaked carcass."

"You mean you're not going to turn in this bandit, Halliday?" asked one of the four. "Why, hell, he'd have killed us."

HALLIDAY put down the gun. "He'd have a tough time killing anyone with this. Guess he didn't even have enough money to buy a few cartridges. He stuck black paper in the chambers to look like the lead ends of bullets.

"The game's over for tonight," he announced. "What you men squawking about? You're getting your money back. I'm not turning in this Swede fella. Not Svenska Olin who was wrecked between a man-killing bronc and a fence. He was a rider six months ago—one of the best. He was the only one who ever rode Hell-on-Earth, the hardest bucking horse in the Southwest."

When the rest had gone, Halliday flung wood on the fireplace, went to the kitchen for ham and eggs and made a hot toddy. And when Svenska Olin had drunk and eaten, the Swede talked. He knew but one thing—horses. He cared for but one thing—horses. And a doctor had told the Swedish rider that if he ever rode a pitching horse again or if he even tried to ride on routine ranch work, it would be his end. To Svenska Olin it was like a sentence to life imprisonment.

Halliday left Svenska drying out by the fire, and crossed the courtyard to knock on the doors of two dark rooms.

At times, he had had as many as fifteen men staying with him in the old house, men he had picked up from the streets as others pick up stray dogs, men left to die by relatives and friends. At present he had only two men living with him in the house, and neither was sick in the way most men were sick that came to stay with Halliday. There was no question of ill health with them; what hung over them was the threat of long years in a penitentiary.

One was Mormon Jake, oldish, with the pallor brand of the dark cells from which he had recently escaped. Knowing Jeff Halliday in years before, he had come to Jeff for refuge as a matter of course, and had been taken in as a matter of course.

The other, a young fellow, was hiding from a state that earnestly desired to send him to prison for ten or more years for shooting a prominent citizen, a citizen who should have been hanged. Halliday had dubbed him "Denver Smith," since he had not come from Denver and his last name was not Smith.

No one in the house except Halliday knew that Denver Smith was wanted for shooting a man who had reached for a gun first. But they would railroad Denver Smith to prison; were offering a big reward to bring him back to pay to the tune of at least ten of the best years of his life.

Mormon Jake had told Halliday he would be killed before they took him back. Denver had not said so, but it was in his eyes.

"Have a drink, all of you," said Halliday. "This is an old friend of mine, a Swedish cowboy. They're sorta scarce in the Southwest."

Mormon Jake and Denver Smith shook hands with Svenska Olin.

After the others, Halliday poured himself out a big drink, lifting it in an ironical toast to the wall where hung his old

range outfit, saddle, bridle with Mexican headstall of heavy leather, bullhide chaps that still carried the bow of endless miles Halliday had ridden in them. He would never put them on again. He was like Svenska Olin; he'd never get back on a horse again. The way he felt now, ten miles in the saddle would do him up.

DELIBERATELY, Halliday studied the other three men. The Swede, to whom a horse was everything and who was condemned never to ride one again. Mormon Jake, who had escaped prison by wounding a couple of guards, and for whom they were looking everywhere, to take back to be caged up for the rest of his life. Denver Smith, a boy with nerve to resent the bull-dozing of the boss of a county.

All four of them, he reflected, were done for. Their lives were at an end. Mormon Jake and Denver Smith were determined not to go back to prison. Svenska, with his broken body, was sentenced to a hell for a man whose whole existence is activity. Halliday had six months to live.

"We're done for," he said slowly. "Us four. They won't get Mormon Jake back alive, nor Denver. I've got a half year. Svenska, if he should try to ride a horse, about the same. And it's none of our fault. I know you men; know that you've lived according to your lights, better lives than most preachers."

They looked at him intently as they listened. Halliday did not talk to be talking. Back of his words was some plan, some proposition.

"We've got to make the most of what time we've got left of the few months left us. If we had the money, say ten thousand dollars, to split between us, then we could live those few months as we wanted. Svenska, if you had a coupla thousand dollars, what would you do?"

"Me, I would buy me a good horse," said Svenska Olin. "The best damn horse I could find. To hell with what doctors say. I could last anyway for a few months, riding over in that country where I lived as a boy, in New Mexico. And some day, if I tumble from a horse dead, it is all right with Svenska Olin."

"Fair enough," said Halliday. "For me, I want to go to a place where people have nothing to do but loaf and gamble. I'd sit around and drink and end up in a big bust. A couple of thousand would do it. And Mormon Jake and Denver Smith, they could drift out in Mexico somewhere if they had *dinero* and by handing out a few hundred occasional as hush money, maybe it would be a year before some bounty-hunter found them out. And when he did, they'd be where they could make a run for it and could last out in the hills maybe a few months more. Well, I think I can get us ten thousand, but it's a dirty business. Not killing anyone, but simply robbing—plain sneak stealing, which none of us ever stooped to before.

Down in Morelos, Mexico, there's a Syrian hotel man, with ranches and sheep and cattle. He's got ten thousand in gold. How do I know, you'll be asking.

"A man who died in my place two weeks ago told me. He knew where the Syrian's got it hid. He wanted to go back after it himself, but he died before he could make it. He told me as pay for my putting him up a year ago. It'll be risky, for the Syrian will turn out plenty of help to get that money back and we may end up dying in a Mexican *juzgado*. But my idea is this: We knock our consciences in the heads, go down there, take that money, make it out and separate. And finish up as we want in a blaze of light—according to whatever idea each one of us has. Flare up like a rocket before the long dark, savvy? It's a mean thing, to steal ten thousand, but we won't

be living long to think about it. What do you say?"

He looked at the three. Real men in spite of what was against them. Men who had earned at least the right to die as they wished.

"I say yes," said Svenska slowly, and Mormon Jake and Denver Smith nodded assent.

CHAPTER TWO

Trouble at Morelos

THEY left before daylight one morning, leaving the big adobe house to the Mexican who had served as cook for Halliday. He and his family, using Halliday's furniture, would run a Mexican rooming house and be assured of a living.

Halliday had raked up enough money for a team, a spring wagon and supplies. He had, in addition, his saddle horse, which he had boarded at a ranch out of town. Halliday rode in the spring wagon, with Mormon Jake as driver. Svenska Olin sat in the back seat, his blue eyes enviously fixed on young Denver Smith, who rode Halliday's saddle horse.

For the first time in two years Halliday was out in the sun and air; rocked by the movement of the vehicle, he fell into a sound sleep.

They camped at a small river and lay over for a few days fishing, lazying in the sun. There was no hurry to get to Morelos. The Syrian and his gold pieces would be waiting for them. Leisurely they journeyed on to the Border and, reaching the small town of Cabeza, stopped for a few days. Here Halliday arranged for a hideout place at the house of a friend where they could hole up if pursuit should be too close after their return.

South, along the road to Morelos, there were few ranches, no towns. Thirty miles below the Border was the abandoned ruin of a hacienda, where they would leave a relay of fresh horses. Here they were to separate. Halliday and Svenska were to pretend to be prospectors, driving to Morelos in the spring wagon from the north. Denver and Mormon Jake were to ride into Morelos on horseback from the south.

It was over two weeks from the time they left Tucson when they reached the big hacienda of Santa Ana whose four long adobe walls enclosed hundreds of rooms and corrals that could hold thousands of cattle. It was a relic of the old days when a Mexican *haciendado* might own a million acres of land and employ hundreds of men.

Their days in the sun had browned Mormon Jake's pale face beneath the grayish whiskers. Sleeping outdoors, going without liquor, eating well, had raised their spirits when they finally left the large ranch house. The extra horses they would leave behind to be looked after by a family of half-starved Mexicans who lived in one of the hundreds of rooms of the big ranch house. The family would keep still about the four men who had dropped in together and had gone out separately.

Mormon Jake, loosening up after years in the penitentiary, talked of old times. Before he had been sentenced for a shooting scrape, Mormon Jake had had two children, living with their uncle in Utah. He talked of them now. He had no hope of ever seeing them again. If he tried to visit them, he might only bring disgrace on them. They believed that he was dead and he would have to stay dead.

"I heard a thousand dollars in gold will buy a ranch down in Mexico," said Mormon Jake. "Maybe I could get a start and bring down my children. We might get a start, you and me, kid," he said to Denver.

"Maybe," said Denver. "It don't matter much what happens to me. There was a girl that I'd have gone through hell for. I thought she would do it for me, until this trouble came up."

They lingered at the hacienda for a week. It was as if they were in no hurry to take on the stain of robbing the Syrian. To take from an old man, even if he were rich, amounted to putting themselves down lower than any of them had ever counted on falling.

Halliday and the Swede left finally in the wagon while Mormon Jake and Denver struck east.

Morelos lay in a small valley which, before the revolution, had been occupied by prosperous Mexican ranchers and farmers. Cottonwoods reared high green crowns above the dusty brown of streets and houses. In the middle of the village was the presidio, the garrison, now empty of soldiers. The only hotel, owned by the Syrian, where they were to meet, was built around a court in which a goat fed off the grass.

THE Syrian, Haddad, who ran the place, was old, wrinkled, white-bearded. A Mexican family did the cooking and took care of the rooms for him. A silent, sour, suspicious old fellow who demanded pay in advance, charging a high price, since Halliday and Svenska were Americans.

After seeing the color of their money, he became confidential. "For twenty years," he said, "I have lived in this country. A country of robbers. You are Americans; I also. If I could only have gone back home with what I had saved. But we have been bled here of everything we made. Once I had twenty thousand sheep, ranches, farms. But the *politicos* bleed you. There is a new one with every change in government, and he puts on new taxes and he steals what he cannot tax out of you."

He lowered his voice. "The new one is the worst we have ever had. He is boss of the country around here—Demetrio Natera. A hog. A thief. And all he has to do if you try to fight, is send for the soldiers at Seyboyeta. And when Natera says the word, they throw you into a hole of a jail, if they do not stand you up before a wall. An American has no rights here."

The next day the other pair came in on horseback, Mormon Jake pretending to act as guide to a wealthy young Easterner. They acted, of course, as strangers to Halliday and Svenska.

There were no other guests and they ate supper with Haddad at a long table in the none-too-clean dining room. Eating strong goat meat and beans red with chili, coffee that was mostly chicory.

"We saw a herd of cattle as we rode in," said Mormon Jake, as he ate. "Looked like they were heading this way."

The Syrian nodded his head. "They belong to a brother and sister who have a ranch south of here. That fat Natera has long wanted their ranch and what is left of their cattle. He stole from them, as he has from me. They have worked hard, those young people. Mormons. They now only want to cross the Line with what they have left, giving up their ranch, but do you think Natera will let them? He is away on a trip, and while he is gone, they hope to get out their cattle. Maybe they will; maybe not. That Natera has spies. Maybe he has only pretended to go away as a trick."

As they finished the meal, they could hear the approaching cattle herd. They would be watered at the river and held outside the town that night and hurried on the next day toward the Border.

Halliday invited Mormon Jake and Denver to join him and Svenska in a

poker game. They played in one corner of the dining room, which served also as lobby.

"It's going to be easy," said Halliday. "The man who died at my place said that the money was hidden behind one of these rafter logs that stick out from the roof in the court. The log was sawed off, savvy, and a space left between the part that sticks out and the rafter inside. All we'll have to do is to pull out that *viga* pole and dig in it for the money. Then we'll put back the log and plaster it up and he may not find out for weeks. If there's a rain, he won't notice the fresh plaster. And it's lookin' like a rain tonight."

There were expostulating voices outside and a clatter of hoofs to the hotel entrance. An oily-faced, fat Mexican in a faded uniform and puttees like red cardboard, carrying a pearl-handled gun on his hips, his thick lips spread in a leering grin, opened the door. Then he stepped back to let a girl of eighteen or nineteen enter before him. A boy, her brother evidently, followed, and then two other Mexicans with black, brush mustaches, in semi-military dress, with pearl-handled revolvers also swinging on their hips.

The Syrian stopped at their table. "Demetrio Natera," he said. 'The *politico;* major-domo of Morelos. He has come back."

"And that boy and girl must be the owners of the herd, I take it?" said Halliday. The Syrian nodded.

THERE was an argument at the door. "But Mees Lowman, the doctor says your herd shows certain foot-and-mouth disease," said Natera. "It was lucky I returned in time to stop you from moving those cattle further." He shrugged his shoulders. "I must order the arrest. A ver' bad seeckness—the foot-and-mouth. And you have done ver' wrong in moving cattle without permit from me."

"It's not foot-and-mouth disease. The cattle have only a few sore mouths from eating cactus," said the girl spiritedly. "That man who examined them is no doctor. You've got to let us go."

"But why you leave us?" complained Natera. "Why you leave Mexico? You stay weeth us, Mees Lowman. I offer you my protection. Me, Demetrio Natera, gives you his word."

"Your protection!" exclaimed the girl contemptuously.

'A bunch of robbers, all of you!" said the boy hotly. "You've stolen all that we had except the cattle."

Natera swung on the boy. "I represent the law in Morelos," he warned him. "It is not good to talk so of the law. And now, for moving cattle with thees terrible seeckness, I must hold you both as prisoner. Not in the jail, no. Here in the hotel. Ees only form; no harm will come to you.

"Nor to you, my friend, Haddad," he said to the Syrian. "After while, I want to talk weeth you. Maybe you have some money you lend to your amigo, Natera, eh?"

The Syrian colored. "Me?" he protested. "I am a poor man."

Natera laughed. "Poor?" he said. "We see!"

He looked at the four men in the corner. "But who are these?" he asked the Syrian.

Natera looked fixedly at Halliday and frowned. "It seems to me that your face is familiar," he observed. "Your beezness, señor?"

"I discussed it with your consul in Cabeza," he answered. "To hunt for an old lost Spanish mine in the mountains south."

"Ah, to hunt for a lost Spanish mine," said Natera with a contemptuous grin.

"American veesitors we always treat weeth courtesy. And now, Haddad, rooms for all of us. I have ridden very far today—after receiving word that thees good people had decided to leave us. Will you not join me at supper, señorita? You and I are going to be ver' good friends."

The girl shook her head, sat down in the corner with her brother. A pretty girl in spite of her plain clothes, with character in her face. With her hair hanging in long braids, she looked almost like a child. The boy was a year or so older. Mormon Jake left suddenly, taking with him a bottle of cheap sotol.

Young Denver moved over to talk to the pair of youngsters. The boy was rather silent but the girl seemed hungry for companionship. She had been in Mexico for five years and Denver represented the outside world to her.

Natera ate noisily, drank tequila, licking salt from the back of his hand with each drink and talking pompously to the two men with him. As he talked, he turned his small coffee-colored eyes often to the girl. When he was done, he lumbered over finally to reach out a brown paw to take hold of one of the long, thick, brown braids. The brother had stepped out for a moment, leaving young Denver Smith sitting by the girl's side.

As she started up, Denver also got up, caught the fat wrist, flung it off. "Keep your hands off her," he ordered curtly. "You're drunk."

"So," purred Natera. His pudgy hand fell to his pearl-handled gun. Halliday was leaning forward a little, his hand close to the lapel of his coat, under which, in a shoulder holster, he carried a .38.

"So I am drunk, am I?" said Natera. He looked around the room, saw Halliday, and read danger in the stranger's face. "But I forget—we treat American citizens with courtesy—when they atten' to their own beezness."

"I think I will go to my room," said the girl. "Thank you," she said to Denver.

"Yes, go to your room, little one," said Natera. Swaying a little on his feet, he stood looking after the girl as she went through the door and into the court. The woman who was to conduct the girl to her room followed, carrying a smoky, tin-bowled oil lamp.

DENVER came over to sit down again with Halliday and Svenska. Halliday caught a glimpse of a face at one of the windows, looking in from the patio. He stepped out. It was Mormon Jake, peering in at Natera. Jake's six-shooter was in his hand, gripped hard.

"What's the matter, Jake?" he asked. "Seen a ghost?"

Mormon Jake turned. The man was a boiling volcano underneath; for a moment he could not speak.

"I've seen a ghost or two myself," said Halliday. "My own ghost. The ghost of a man that once wasn't afraid of anything, least of all of wading into a pig like this Natera and punching a few bullet holes in him. But we're down here for money. Dirty money. And having gone that far, we might as well go the rest of the way and not start anything."

They heard a sudden thump from the dining room and they ran inside. The Syrian hotel-keeper lay writhing on the floor as if he had been shot.

"My heart!" he squeaked, in a high-pitched voice. "I am going to die. Another attack. Somebody take me to my room. You," he appealed to Halliday.

Halliday picked up the slight figure and carried him, writhing and moaning, across the court to the room to which the fat servant guided him. The room was furnished like the others in the hotel, but on

a bureau there were photographs of a woman and two girls.

"My heart!" Haddad complained again, as Halliday laid him on the bed. "Get out; lock the door!" he told the servant. "I have not long to live," he whispered to Halliday. "That robber will be in here the next minute. I can't get away. No chance even if I were well. This man is in power in here and he has found out some way that I have money hidden. He can do in Morelos what he wants."

Tears were standing in the old man's eyes. "I have not seen them for five years. I have thought to get rich here and then go back to them, but men like Natera have stolen everything—horses, cattle, land. It is too late now. He will never let me go. All I have left is a little gold. I had it hidden in the hole of the viga pole at the end of the court. I took it out this evening. I have heard of you, Halliday, when you were ranching east of here. Your word was good, everyone said. Here is a piece of paper. The address is my family's in America. You would not take money from my small daughters and my old wife. It's all they have to live on. See that it gets to them, in spite of Natera."

The rapid talk became mere phrases that stood out like the humps on a plain. This little Syrian's life was spread bare before Halliday. A scared little man who had lived here for years in fear and in exile from his family, hoping to be able to escape to them finally with a little money to provide them with a living.

"This Natera is a plain thief," he went on. "He will force me to tell—torture me. He'd take from an old man what he has saved with sweat and blood. You will promise to try to get this money to them?"

There was a thumping on the door. Natera was bellowing for admittance. Halliday hesitated, thinking of their trip down here, thinking of their plans to use the money.

"Quick," said Haddad. "Let an old man rest easy. I have taken it to your room; it is under your pillow. I know you would not refuse the request of an old man who is as good as dead."

Halliday nodded. "I'll take it," he said. "And see that it gets to them."

The door burst open and the fat Natera bounced in. "Seeck, ver' seeck?" he muttered as he came across the room. "You will be much seecker, Haddad!" He grinned wolfishly and turned to Halliday. "Señor, you will please go now. I weel take good care of my good friend, Haddad."

Haddad nodded for Halliday to go. He was groaning again, holding his wrinkled hand above his heart.

HALLIDAY returned to the dining lobby and found Mormon Jake keeping company with a bottle of sotol. "Come to my room," said Halliday. "Find Denver and Svenska. I think they went out to the corrals. Bring them, too."

He stood for a moment in the patio. It had turned cold. A storm was booming out in the valley, traveling down from the mountains. Then he went back and climbed the creaking stairs to his room. When the three men joined him, Halliday lifted up the big pillow on his bed, revealing below it, four small rawhide sacks that were heavy when he lifted them.

He faced the three. He had led them down here, built up their hopes for the brief future left them. And he had given his word to a man who might die shortly and none be the wiser.

"Ten thousand dollars there," he said. "But I've got to tell you men that this money is entrusted to my care. I am going back on you. If you want this money, you'll have to take it from me."

The three seemed hardly to see the

sacks or to realize what he was saying. "That's what I had to say," he finished.

"I've got something to say, too," said Mormon Jake, huskily. "I am leaving you. This boy and girl, they are my children. Their name is Lowman. So was mine. That girl is Lin Lowman, my daughter; the boy, Dan Lowman, my boy."

Halliday stared at him.

"And I'm going to kill this Natera," said Mormon Jake. "I wondered why I had the luck to get out of the pen. I see it now. So I could help them; so I could kill this Mexican."

"And where you kill one Natera, another comes in his place," said Halliday. "They'd kill you for it and make it all the harder for them."

Mormon Jake's face worked. "I am supposed to be dead to my boy and girl. You see what they are—children that any man could be proud of, and I didn't want my troubles told to them. Their uncle moved to Mexico. He died. The cattle out there are all they have left."

"I'm with you," said Denver Smith to Jake. "What good would a little money do me? I'd probably throw it away on a lot of women—drinking."

"How about you, Svenska?" asked Halliday.

The Swede had been looking at the wall, paying no attention to the talk. "The horse of that man Natera—did you see him?" he asked. "A California sorrel. Six years old. The finest horse I ever set eyes on. There never was such a horse."

"A hell of a bunch of crooks," said Halliday with a mirthless laugh. "A damn fool Swede who wants a horse and would risk his life to ride him. Another damn fool who made a promise to a Syrian, and a young fool who has looked into a girl's eyes and has an itch to be a hero for her. And a father who has found his family!"

CHAPTER THREE

Rio Bound

THE storm drifted across the valley to Morelos, bringing rain with flashes of lightning that split the hard black shell of the sky. Out at the herd, the men riding guard on the Lowman cattle, sang in between rumblings of thunder, trying to hold the restless animals.

When the rain was over, a cold blast of air moved down from the mountains and blanketed the town. The cattle quieted. Near a little cedar wood fire, the men that were not needed on night-guard lay on the wet ground, the Mexicans with their heads and upper bodies wrapped in blankets.

Natera had put out a man to watch the cattle, but because of the cold, this man came to the hotel and asked Natera if he could stay for a while by the fire. There was a monte game in the dining room and Natera was winning. While they emptied a bottle of grape brandy, Natera's voice became more squeaky. He talked of his plans; he would roast the Syrian's feet on the morrow, make him tell where that ten thousand was hidden. Only Natera had it as fifty thousand dollars; hidden treasure mounted rapidly in value in Mexico.

A shutter banged somewhere in the wind. Halliday standing in the patio shivered. Once he had been able to stand sleeping out in the snow. Svenska joined him, his big twisted body hunched against the cold also. With him was Mormon Jake and Denver Smith who had been talking to young Dan Lowman out at the corrals.

"The Lowmans aim to make a drive," said Denver. "The man Natera had watching the herd is here at the hotel. Lin has slipped out the window of her room. She and Dan are going out to the herd now. As soon as it's quiet, they'll

start the cattle for the Border, hoping to get them across before Natera can stop 'em."

"They got no chance," said Mormon Jake. "They won't get ten miles. It'll take over two days and nights to drive cattle that far. I'd kill this Natera, but like Halliday says, there'll be another one in his place and it'll go harder for Dan and Lin. I'm going along on the drive and so's Denver. But they got no chance."

They all realized it. It was only the last-hope attempt of two desperate people. The Lowmans had three Americans with them who owned a few of the cattle in the herd. The other riders were Mexicans who would be loyal enough to brave Natera's anger and fight if necessary.

"Fighting won't do 'em any good," said Halliday. "Natera can send twenty miles for soldiers. But maybe Natera can be delayed. I heard him bragging to his *compadres* that he is going to spend the night in the room at the end of the patio."

This was Lin Lowman's room. Mormon Jake growled, and his big hand clasped his gun. The other turned the knob on the door.

Halliday gripped Jake's wrist. "No need of that yet. He'll spend the night in that room, all right, but tied up and wrapped in enough blankets to smother him. Svenska will be in that room instead of a girl and he'll take care of Natera. Denver, you and Jake go along with the herd. Svenska and me will be staying to hold Natera as long as we can. When we can't keep him back any longer, we'll join you."

Mormon Jake and Denver prepared to follow the Lowmans to the herd, getting their horses quietly from the corral in the back.

Halliday went into the dining room lobby, and being invited to join Natera's game, ordered a bottle of cognac. The Mexican woman was waddling back and forth between the kitchen and the room of the sick Syrian. Natera sent in ironical messages by her. Tomorrow he would squeeze out of the Syrian the hiding place of his wealth.

HALLIDAY, as he laid his bets, could picture the herd moving out. Mexicans getting out of their blankets, riding north through the drizzle, moving the cattle across the wet valley. And along with the Lowmans would be their father, riding unknown to his son and daughter. And with them also would be riding Denver Smith because of a girl with whom he had half fallen in love.

Through the night they would keep up the forced drive, Mexican and Anglo drivers shouting at the herd in both their languages. Heading for a notch in the range of hills that would drop them into the valley of the Hacienda Santa Ana, looking anxiously back in the daylight hours, listening in the darkness for pursuit. Depending on him to keep back Natera.

A chance in a thousand of holding Natera back—for the time the drive would take. He ordered more cognac and Natera drank heavily and taking Halliday for a rich mining man, began calling him "amigo."

The game went on, with Halliday losing enough to Natera to keep him interested. Several times Natera's eyes fell on the man whom he had told to watch the cattle and who had come in to the fire to get warm. "Go back to the herd," he ordered finally in Spanish. "These Americans are tricky."

"First let us have a drink," interposed Halliday. "The cattle will be safe enough without being watched. They wouldn't dare go against you, Natera. Another bottle of cognac.

"What a man likes he takes," he went on as they drank. "If he is a man. A

good looking girl, eh, Natera, that Lowman one? I wish I were boss of this country, as you are. I would not be sitting here."

"A pretty girl," agreed Natera, and suddenly he got to his feet and stood there swaying from the liquor. "What a man likes, he takes," he repeated and gulped down a final drink. And then he staggered toward the door. "If anyone interferes," he ordered over his shoulder, "kill him."

Svenska would take care of Natera. His huge hands would clamp around Natera's throat, choke him to insensibility. Then tied and gagged in bedding, Natera would be left until morning.

After half an hour, the Swede came in and winked at Halliday. Halliday played on, keeping Natera's men awake by losing a few dollars to them and then winning them back. Meanwhile he ordered drinks and the three finally went to sleep on the floor.

It was late morning when they awoke and later still when some one came to report that the Lowman herd was gone. Natera's lieutenants heard the news sleepily; finally one went to hammer on the door of the room into which Natera had forced his way. When muffled talk came to him, the door was forced, Natera was found trussed up, swaddled in blankets. When he emerged into the dining room, his face was purple and he was choking with rage.

So the herd was gone! He would catch the herders, tear them to pieces. Shoot them all. This was treason—revolution. He would send a man to Seyboyeta, the nearest garrison, for a bunch of soldiers. Loudly he ordered one of his men to get a horse, to kill it getting word to Seyboyeta.

Halliday hastened to the corral and found the messenger saddling in furious haste. Halliday jingled some gold pieces in his pockets. "A horse with a stone in his hoof does not go far, is it not so?" he said in Spanish. "For one hundred dollars, one ought to be able to find a stone to lame a horse. Half down; half when I see you again. And a bullet for you if you double-cross me."

The man grinned. "The road is very rocky," he admitted, taking the money.

Halliday went back to the hotel to sympathize with Natera. Natera had fresh cause for grief. The maid had just discovered that the Syrian was dead.

"I will tear this hotel down brick by brick to find that money," announced Natera, "after I get me these cattle back. Where is my horse?"

Pressed by Halliday, he consented to have a drink, which turned to several. And sympathized with by Halliday, he lolled away the morning.

While outside, Svenska Olin walked around the California sorrel, talking to it, itching to get on the sleek back, no matter if he tumbled off dead the next minute.

NATERA at noon, persuaded by Halliday to wait for the soldiers, consented to a few hands of poker. In the afternoon, however, another whim seized him. He was going to ride on with the few men he could gather in the village. The soldiers were to follow with all possible speed.

"Very well," said Halliday. He would go along with his *compadre,* Natera. The spring wagon was ordered for Halliday and Svenska. Natera got on his sorrel gelding and they started out on a lope, Mexican fashion. After them Halliday and Svenska bounced along rapidly in the spring wagon. It was too late then to catch the herd that day. Natera decided to camp and go on in the early morning. His fat body yearned for sleep after his uncomfortable night.

In the notch in the hills was one of the

outlying camps of the old Torreon ranch. And here Natera found a big bunch of Torreon vaqueros, heavily armed, camping. They had been hunting for a Mexican boy who had been stolen from a small village on the Torreon ranch by Apaches of the Sierra Madres. These Apaches, descendants of the bunch who had escaped from Arizona in old Geronimo's days, occasionally continued the old practice of adding to their population by kidnaping.

The Torreon vaqueros had given up the hunt and were returning to their ranch. They were brave men, but they did not like to hunt Apaches. Let the soldiers do such dangerous things. Natera at once commandeered the bunch of riders. They would ride early in the morning and capture the Lowmans, without the help of the soldiers.

Halliday and the Swede exchanged glances. The herd would not yet be half way to the Border.

The two joined the camp, and after supper, spread a monte layout on a blanket. There was plenty of tequila in the spring wagon beside the rawhide sacks which Haddad had entrusted to Halliday's care. But Natera did not join in; he wanted sleep, and he wanted no noise in camp.

"To bed," he ordered harshly. "No more card playing, Señor Halliday. Keep your tequila, for tomorrow we have serious beezness."

Halliday and Olin returned to their spring wagon to go to bed. Two horses were tied at the spring wagon eating the alfalfa which Halliday and Svenska had brought for their own team. One was the California sorrel of Natera's, tied there at Halliday's invitation.

They rolled in their blankets, but they did not sleep. When the camp was quiet they got up. It would not be possible for them to get the spring wagon out of camp, but they could ride.

"The doctor said if you started riding horses, it would be your finish," said Halliday with a grin. "You better stay."

"When I get a chance to ride a horse like this one," said the Swede, "the doctor can go to hell."

He swung up on Natera's mount and Halliday forked the other. They slipped unnoticed out of camp and galloped out to the horse bunch, a mile away, in charge of a half-witted old fellow. Finding him, Halliday pushed a six-shooter into his ribs and took him and his herd north, tying a rope to the neck of the herder's horse to make sure that the rider stayed with them.

They pushed the horse bunch along on a lope. They might have an hour, maybe two or three, before the alarm was given and pursuit started. There had been half a dozen horses left saddled in camp. Natera would send riders pounding in pursuit as soon as he realized the perfidy of his good amigo Halliday.

Three hours and there was a pound of hoofs behind them, five riders pushing up fast in the moonlight. As they came nearer, the pursuers raised a yell and sent a few shots into the air.

Halliday and Svenska could not hope to keep them back and hold the horse herd at the same time. They abandoned the horses and rode on up the valley. The five joined by the wrangler, immediately started the horses back to the camp in the hills where Natera and their dismounted companions would be impatiently waiting.

CHAPTER FOUR

Last Stand

ACROSS the valley, the Lowman cattle plowed along, a weary herd, tiring more every hour as their drivers pushed them on in an effort that was doomed to failure. That they had gotten this far without Natera catching them was due to Halliday, and now he had failed. If

Natera had not run into the Torreon cowboys, Halliday had intended to take Natera's little bunch by surprise, hold them prisoners.

When Halliday and Svenska came up, they found Mormon Jake with the drag riders, hoarse-voiced from yelling at the stragglers of the herd.

"That skunk sent for the soldiers?"

"Yes. I got the messenger to delay for a while on the road, but luck was against us. Natera ran into a bunch of cowboys from the Torreon ranch. Enough of 'em to ham-string us—at least hold us until the soldiers come up. The herd looks all in, and it's still over thirty miles to the Border. Out in the open they'd polish us off fast, but we can swing into that old Santa Ana hacienda ahead. In there we could probably keep off this bunch of vaqueros for tonight, but what good will it do? We can't drive on tomorrow, with the coyotes hanging on us, and the soldiers are bound to come sometime."

"I see what you're driving at," said Jake. "We could leave the herd and all of us make a break for the Border. But they won't do it, Halliday. They won't quit until they got to—and maybe not then," he added.

Directly ahead of them under its high walnut and cottonwood trees, lay the flat sprawling ruin of Hacienda Santa Ana. Behind them, toward evening, they could see midget horses and riders. In an hour, they were full size, sweeping up fast, the riders spurring their jaded horses unmercifully.

With the weary herd on a shambling trot, the Lowman riders raced the cattle to the ruin and got them into a corral which had been a wagon yard. On one side was a plain high wall, on the other three were sheds and rooms, all with roofs having high parapets. The hacienda, which was a complete village under one series of roofs, had been also a small fortress. The space into which they drove the herd still had all its walls intact.

Grimly they prepared for a siege. Water was brought into one of the rooms where Lin Lowman with the meager equipment they had brought set calmly about cooking supper.

The sun set behind a cloud bank. It was cold and another storm was whipping down from the mountains.

Mormon Jake had told Halliday that it was no use to argue, but nevertheless he made an appeal to the girl. "You at least could go on, Miss Lowman," he told her.

"Yes, you had better be going on," said Mormon Jake humbly. "That Natera is a skunk. He can't do any more than kill us men. But you—"

Lin Lowman looked at her brother and smiled gravely at Denver Smith. "But all I have in the world is here. I don't mean property. I mean my brother, those that I care for. My mother and father are dead. I wouldn't leave Dan, and he wouldn't leave you here to fight for our property. And the men who have a few cattle with ours won't leave them for Natera to take. We've got to stay with them."

Natera's party came along now, riding boldly up to the hacienda.

Natera had turned foxy. He had sent another rider to summon the soldiers, since he had had no reply to the first messenger. He saw now that these Americans were all banded together to rush the Lowman cattle out of the country. And remembering that the Syrian, when near death, had had his door locked for a talk with Halliday, he guessed that the Syrian might have given his money to Halliday to take out of the country for him. Natera remembered Halliday now; in better health he had fought for a time in one of the various Mexican armies. The Syrian's money might have been in the

spring wagon in which Halliday had traveled into Morelos. Natera ground his teeth when he thought of that possibility and hoping to frighten them into surrender, demanded that they march out like sheep, if they expected mercy from him.

When they refused, he told them with horrible details what he was going to do to them. He would cut slices from their haunches and broil them before their eyes. He would brand them with one of the huge complicated brands of old Spanish ranches.

THEY knew he would do all that he threatened, but they jeered him. Whereupon Natera, while waiting for darkness to attack, camped in a far corner of the hacienda and had supper. Then, fortified by the liquor Natera provided, Torreon's vaqueros came toward the corner where the cattle were penned, crawling over the roofs in the darkness.

Svenska Olin moved over and hunched down on the roof beside Halliday. "What did you say, Halliday—we go out like a rocket?" he joked.

Natera's men, veterans, most of them, of the various small armies operating in northern Mexico, experienced fighters, wasted no time in getting into action. They were coming on fast, swarming along the broken walls, using all the available cover. Their guns sounded off with a burst of shots and bullets whistled over the roofs.

The real attack came from the roofs on the south where a group of shadows suddenly opened fire. Halliday, Svenska, and Mormon Jake ran to meet it, emptying their guns at a roof which Natera's men had seized. A loud yell sounded, and a man's figure was outlined above a parapet, then went plunging to the ground. One man was left sprawled out on the roof; the others retreated.

The heavy boom of the guns sounded constantly. Acrid powder smoke drifted. The fighting got hotter. The air was filled with the constant whine of bullets.

Denver Smith moved over to help Halliday and Mormon Jake and Svenska, who were holding the roof on which the Torreon cowboys concentrated their fire. Shots dug into the earth of the parapet, sent little clouds of dust into the air. More guns started up from the northwest corner. Natera must be offering money inducements to Torreon's cowboys, for they were risking their lives recklessly.

Mormon Jake, too eager to do damage, arose and a shot tore into his arm. A Mexican and an American rider employed by the Lowmans were struck, but in their attack, at least half a dozen Natera men had been killed or wounded.

It settled to a battle, hour after hour of interchange of shots, which dwindled away as the ammunition ran low. Six-shooters and rifles kept up a desultory fire and a shotgun of the Lowmans occasionally boomed.

Mormon Jake grunted once and between coughs asked for more cartridges. Only when Halliday saw the blood stain over Jake's jacket, did he realize that Jake had been hit again, hard this time, shot through the body.

"It's nothing," Jake lied as he tried to reload his rifle.

"There's no reason why Lin and Dan shouldn't know now," said Halliday. "You're in a bad way, Jake, let me tell 'em."

"No," said Jake roughly. "Damn you, Halliday, don't you say a word to them. They ain't to know their father served time in no pen. I asked Lin about her father," went on Mormon Jake. "Why, she cried when she talked of him, after all these years. She remembered that when he was alive he was working out on a ranch and visitin' her and Dan when

he could git away. And she told me that he was killed on the range while helpin' another man out—a—a sorta hero. That was part truth; I was helpin' out my boss in a fight over a water hole when I killed a man. I had a friend write when they sent me away, that I'd been killed and buried. I thought I'd never get out to see them again, and I didn't want no children of mine comin' to visit me behind bars like I was a wolf in a cage. And I don't want 'em to be told now."

THE storm had drifted over and a light snow fluttered down in the valley, just enough to cover the ground. The hacienda roofs, the corrals, and broken walls were mantled in white. With a slight break in the clouds letting the moon and stars in, there was enough light to reveal any sudden rush by Natera's men. The vaqueros were in no hurry to attack again.

Mormon Jake got to his knees and took his .45 from its holster. "I think I better get one or two more of 'em," he muttered, and suddenly dragged himself to his feet. And then to the amazement of a group of the Torreon cowboys, he started walking over the roofs straight toward them.

They opened fire on him in wild haste. Mormon Jake's body sagged a little, as if the weight of the lead in him was pulling it down. But he made it to the opposite roof and raising the gun-muzzle over the parapet, he fired.

Two men fell over the roof edge and a moment later, Mormon Jake followed. He lay on the ground, a dark blotch in the light fall of snow.

Denver Smith wanted to go after him, but Halliday held him back. "He's dead a dozen times," he said. "You can't do him any good. It's like a checker game. Jake jumped two men before he was put off the board. If they get you, it'd spoil it for Jake."

Denver Smith squatted down again. "Great finish, Halliday, for four men that came down to steal ten thousand dollars," he remarked grimly. "A damn good finish, I'd say—if we got the rest out."

They could hear the cowboys expostulating with Natera who was urging a fresh attack. They were old soldiers; but it was no use, they said, to force this fight. Better wait until daylight. The guns died down finally, save for an occasional shot.

Halliday and the others crouched in the snow on the roof, waiting, watching—realizing that the defeat of Natera was only temporary. Their chance to win out was one in a thousand.

The moon shook itself entirely clear of clouds, flooding the hacienda and the valley. Toward morning they could see a long line of riders jagging from the direction of Seyboyeta. Soldiers!

And the slim hope to which Halliday had clung, vanished.

CHAPTER FIVE

Ace in the Hole

THEY were close. Demetrio Natera had them beyond any doubt. Mormon Jake had died to no purpose. His body, still lying in the snow, represented only a futile attempt to help his son and daughter. So Halliday, sick at heart, descended from the roof, found Lin Lowman and Denver Smith and Dan Lowman talking.

"That man, Mormon Jake, lying over there," he told Lin and Dan Lowman, "is your father. He died in the hope of helping you youngsters. He wanted to see you get out. And you have only one chance left—to ride out of here and kill your horses getting to the Line."

Dan and Lin Lowman thought of the gray-bearded stranger who had fought for them, wondering how it could be possible that he could have been their father.

"The only pay he'd asked would be to have you two youngsters get away safe," Halliday continued. "You'll ride for him?"

Dan Lowman shook his head. "He wouldn't want us to leave now. Some of our riders aren't able to ride. We can't leave them."

The girl looked at Halliday gravely. "I'm glad you told us it was our father," she said. "If only we had known before. But we've got to stay now; take what comes. Dad used to tell Dan and me never to quit; never to give up. We have not given up yet. Maybe these soldiers won't let Natera do as he wishes."

There was finality in her voice. And there was something in Lin and Dan Lowman that wouldn't let them quit or run away, that refused to recognize defeat. It had come as an inheritance from that lonesome figure in black lying on the white snow.

They all gathered along one roof top, crouching down behind the parapet. There was no hope of mercy from the commander of the little group of soldiers. Officers and soldiers were all anxious to please men who had political power like Natera. The Lowman herd and all that was connected with it would be taken back to Morelos, and there, Natera would do to them all that he had threatened.

The sun rose, flooding the white valley, turning pink the snowy tops of distant ranges. The soldiers had ridden leisurely up to a far corner of the hacienda and made camp. Cook fires were started. Pack mules were unloaded. After they had breakfasted, an officer, swollen with a little power, would demand that they surrender.

Halliday looked at Denver and Lin Lowman; they were smiling at each other as they talked. These two had lived long in the few desperate hours they had known one another; they had come close.

There was a stir in the camp of the soldiers; the bark of a sharp order. A natty, handsome young officer, with the nonchalance of his kind, came strolling with two men across the roof.

At sight of his face, Halliday suddenly stood up in full view. The officer, after staring for a moment at Halliday, suddenly hurried on to hold out his hand.

Halliday, as he greeted him, was like a man who sees suddenly that he already holds in his hand the very ace he had been hoping would be dealt him. He felt like letting out a yell at this unbelievable miracle. He knew this officer almost as well as a man knows his own brother; at one time they had been closer than brothers.

This officer was Pete Fernandez, who had been foreman on Halliday's Mexican ranch; had once ridden off with Halliday to join a rebel force. They had fought together in one short campaign. Halliday had dozens of bitter enemies in Mexico. This officer might as well have been one of them. But the one chance in a million had brought a friend who would at least protect them from Natera's savagery.

"We stopped in to see what this is all about," said Fernandez. "Natera sent out a messenger that armed Americans, a small army, were stealing his cattle. I'd already been ordered out to hunt a bunch of Apaches that had stolen a boy, so I dropped in to investigate. What is all this?"

Halliday explained in detail and Fernandez listened.

"Swelled head, eh?" said Fernandez. "I know how to deal with that kind. Natera!" he bawled.

The fat boss of Morelos appeared, bewildered at the officer's sharp tone.

"You raise an army to annoy the citizens of a foreign country, and steal their property!" accused Fernandez swiftly. "Perhaps you have an idea also to start a revolution?"

Natera puffed up in pompous dignity and then realizing that Fernandez was deadly serious, he collapsed.

"Mexico, you would think she is lawless!" said Fernandez, warming to his subject. "Since you like so well to fight, Señor Natera, supposing you ride with us to chase Apaches all over the Sierra Madres. I have authority to draft any men I need. I need you. With me you will go to be away for three months or maybe six, however long this hunt lasts."

"Me?" gasped Natera. "You are joking, Captain. I have not time. I am not a soldier. My duties—"

"Forget them," said Fernandez genially. "We will make you a soldier. You have plenty of fat to climb over the steep Madres."

He swung at Halliday. "Why don't you come with us, too, Jeff?" he asked. "You look a little thin, amigo. I bet you've lived too long in a town and you have drunk too much. Come be a soldier for a while; help us hunt these degenerate descendants of the Apaches you Americans chased down into our country."

Halliday grinned. He had felt better since leaving the dark rooms of the Tucson house; he had ridden and fought for long hours. Maybe the doctor had been wrong in giving him six months to live. And remembering the calm steadfast courage of Lin Lowman, what did it matter if he did not live? He had quit in Tucson. Plain quit. Had sunk so low in courage that he had to learn about it all over again—from a girl. He could send the Syrian's money to his family, by the Lowmans, and ride with Pete Fernandez.

He thought of Svenska Olin. "I'll accept that invitation if you'll take two of us," he said. "Two men that you may have to bury before you've seen any Apaches."

"We may have to bury all of us before we're done," said Fernandez. "They sent us out in the hope that the Apaches would kill us before we got back. *Bueno!* You once had the rating of an officer, Halliday. No reason you shouldn't have it again, unofficially. For orderly, I will give you Natera. You may be able to take some of the fat off him."

"It will be a pleasure to try," said Halliday softly, eyeing the soft round body of Demetrio Natera. "And while you're about it, Captain, you might arrange to report the death of a man in our party here. He's going on with this herd of cattle to help the owners start up a ranch across the Line. If an officer of the Mexican army should certify to his death, certain people in the States would stop looking for him."

Fernandez laughed, slapped Halliday's back. "For you I will certify to a dozen deaths."

Halliday called to Svenska Olin. "Come on, square-head. We're riding out to hunt Apaches. Maybe it will kill you and me to go along, but you'll be riding that sorrel and we'll bury him with you, Indian fashion, so you won't be lacking a mount."

Svenska's big mouth split open in a grin. Maybe the doctors were wrong; maybe they were right. Maybe he and Jeff Halliday wouldn't last. But until they were flat on their backs, two men would be back where men belonged—in the saddle!

THE END

Another Great Nafziger Novelette

In the September Issue **Out August 1st!**

BRIMSTONE

By Wallace K. Norman
(Author of "Gallows Bait," etc.)

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THIS is the story of a man and a six-shooter, and it begins with the birth of a lusty-lunged, blue eyed babe in the town of Bonita, a lonely, sun-scorched adobe settlement. Isolated in the foothills of the Ratans, Bonita didn't amount to a great deal. And by a fit enough parallel, the family that gave young Tobe Breckenridge to Bonita didn't amount to much either.

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BRIMSTONE HERITAGE

Novelette of Cow-town Law

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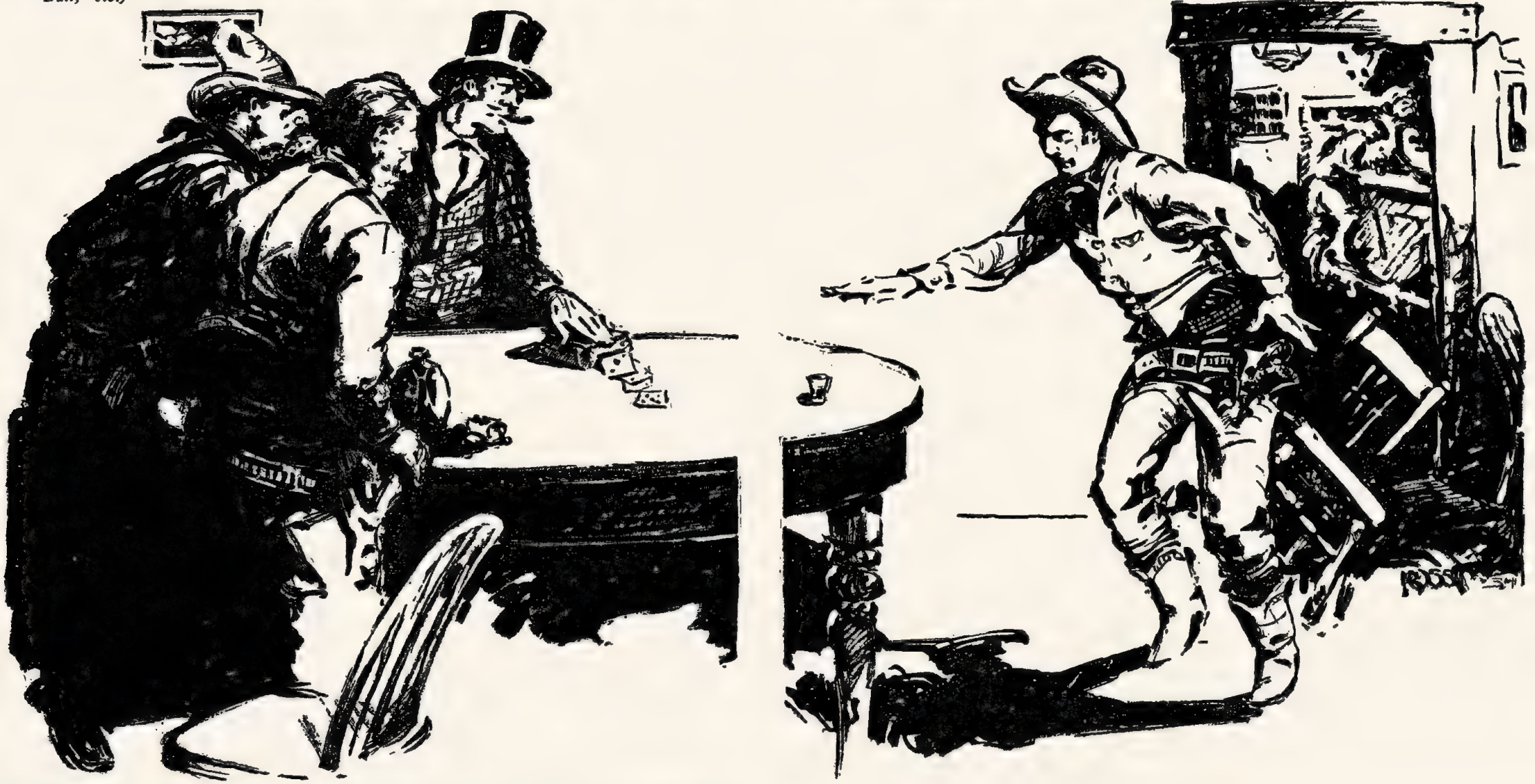

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His mother, a sad, over-worked woman, died shortly after his birth, and from then on Tobe saw little of home life. One by one his older brothers, a wild, truculent lot, drifted away. Some died in saloon brawls; the rest just disappeared. And when his father, in a moment of drunken forgetfulness, failed to anticipate the dangers attendant upon riding a bad bronc, young Tobe was left to face the none-too-friendly world alone.

Bequeathed a barren ranch and a few head of run-down stock, mortgaged beyond redemption, the solemn-faced youth was confronted with a serious problem. With no money in his pockets, and little work to be had in the vicinity, there was but one course to follow. Wherefore, he saddled up his best pony and departed Bonita, with no one regretting his going

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save a small, brown-eyed girl who wept the morning when his trail dust faded into the mountain air.

Time rolled on. Word of the kid now and then drifted back to Bonita from the direction of the Border. Gittin' handy with a gun, eh? All of Bonita, excepting the brown-eyed girl, shrugged indifferent shoulders. Well, what'd yuh expect; he's a Breckenridge, ain't he? So much for young Tobe.

Bonita, drowsing in the shadow of the mountains, suddenly became important. Gold was discovered in the foothills town, and the rush was on. A short period of feverish activity followed, then the bonanza strips faded out cold. On the heels of the disappearance of gold the spur of a railroad pushed down and connected the suddenly-sobered town with Eastern markets.

Over night Bonita became the shipping point of a vast, rich cow country. The fall season came, and with it the beef drives. Cattlemen and punchers with coin in their pockets and a hot craving in their stomachs, poured into Bonita in droves. Trade began to skyrocket, and business men made money hand over fist.

But, in reverse of the accepted, there was a dark lining to the silver cloud. Forced by the passing of the frontier elsewhere, tough characters came flocking into the new cow-capital like buzzards to an ambushed wagon train, adding to the horde of disreputables left over from the gold rush. In quick succession two doughty marshals made the one way trip to Bonita's own Boot Hill. And the little town, rubbing its palms over its new-found bonanza, awoke with a start one morning to find dead men sprawled in the streets.

Then one day, at the peak of the beef drive, Tobe Breckenridge came home. Knocking trail dust from his hat, he mounted to the porch of the Saddle Horn Saloon and surveyed Bonita's thronged main street. Within the space of five or six blocks a dozen saloons and gambling joints roared with music. Wave after wave of red-faced punchers trooped up and down the street, noisily celebrating their release from the monotony of summer herding. Tobe grinned appreciatively. A far cry from the sleepy little 'dobe settlement he had known six years ago.

The last of the clan Breckenridge had undergone considerable change himself. From a stringy kid he had grown into a full-shouldered man whose clean-cut features narrowly missed being handsome. Generally speaking there was, to the experienced eye, little about him of the cowpuncher. For one thing, his hands were not overly darkened by the sun, suggesting that he had found an easier way of making a living. His clothing was plain but expensive, as was the six-shooter that somehow seemed to be a part of his right hip.

"Well, I'll be doggoned!" he marveled, grinning to himself as his glance roved up and down the bustling main street and finally settled upon the garish entrance of the Saddle Horn. "Hell-a-whoopin', an' plumb growed up!"

TURNING, he made his way across the porch into the saloon and shoved his way to the bar. He was on the point of tossing off his second drink, when a familiar figure suddenly hove into view behind the bar.

"Well, howdy, kid!" The man on the other side of the long, crowded counter stopped short at the sight of Tobe, a patronizing smile lighting his swarthy face. "What yuh doin' up here? Thought yuh was down in Sonora."

"Was, Jack," Tobe replied. "But the trail-itch got me. Anyways, I sorta owed this buzzin' burg a visit, it bein' my home town."

"The hell yuh say!" Jack Maunders' look of surprise deepened. "Well—how do yuh like my lay-out here? Good enough for the handsome city o' your birth?"

"Better'n the joint yuh had in Las Carcia," Tobe grinned back, and the face of the saloon owner darkened a little.

"Got somethin' in view up here?" Maunders asked, changing the subject.

Tobe shrugged. "Nope. Sorta low on cash, an' I heard things were good up here, so I jest dropped in."

Maunders' cold hazel eyes narrowed sharply. "Come on back to the office," he said after a moment. "I want to talk to yuh."

Tobe hesitated an instant, then shrugged, and followed the saloon-keeper to a door behind the poker tables at the foot of the bar. Entering on Maunders' heels, Tobe halted with a jerk. Within three feet of him stood a tall, sandy-haired man, across whose left cheek ran a jagged knife scar. For a tight split-second the two men regarded one another without moving, the right hand of each tensing imperceptibly.

"Howdy, Hawley," Tobe broke the strained silence and stepped around the sandy-haired one. Hawley whirled, his flinty eyes narrowing. A bitter feud, which sprang from mutual dislike and Bob Hawley's tender pride, existed between the two. For years Bob had been considered the fatest gun-hand on the Border, but shortly after Tobe's arrival in that vicinity considerable doubt had sprung up. Certain of the Border gentry claimed that Tobe was Hawley's superior with a six-shooter, but there the comparison had stopped. Tobe had never participated in gunplay that was not condoned by the existing code of ethics, whereas Hawley's record was supposed to contain everything from petty thievery to cold-blooded murder.

"Thought yuh'd drug trail south where things is safe," Hawley smiled, and when he spoke the scar across his cheek lifted one corner of his mouth.

"Safe—from who?" Tobe said stopping, his thumbs hooking in his shell-belt. "From you, yuh—"

Maunders shoved his thick bulk between them. "Hog-tie that graveyard palaver!" he snapped. "You two should of shot this out three years ago. Since you've held it this long, don't start now. I got—"

"*He's* had plenty o' chances to shoot it out," Tobe cut in icily. "I never went lookin' for trouble, but I ain't run from him yet."

Bob glowered poisonously a moment, then turned and swaggered from the office with a snort of contempt.

"What's that buzzard-feeder doin' here?" Tobe asked. But his question was merely for effect, because he knew the answer. As in the past in other towns, Maunders was the ring-leader of the bad element, and Bob Hawley acted as field general.

"Oh, jest hangin' around," Maunders evaded casually. "Bob ain't a bad sort when yuh know him right. Now, look—I got somethin' yuh can handle, an' I'll pay you plenty—"

"Hawley figger in it anywhere?" Tobe demanded quickly, his eyes probing Maunders' face.

"Hell, no!" the saloon man declared emphatically. "I know you don't go in for his line of stuff. Here's what it is—I'm short on good faro dealers, an' I know yuh can handle a lay-out as good as anybody. An' here's the point," Maunders stopped and threw Tobe a significant look. "These damn cowboys is proddy an' too quick with their guns. If they drop a roll, they figger the game's crooked an' they start shootin'. I need dealers that can take care o' theirselves."

TOBE reflected a moment in silence. There never had been any friendship between Maunders and himself, and he knew why Maunders was offering him the job. It was solely because Tobe's gun reputation would check those customers prone to indulge in gunplay unless confronted by some one they feared. Having the Saddle Horn shot up nightly was costly to trade and fixtures, and even though it meant aggravating Hawley, Tobe's presence would be to Maunders' advantage. And, for the time being, it would be greatly to Tobe's advantage too, considering that he was down to his last few dollars.

"Well," he said after a moment of thoughtful silence, "dealin' for the house ain't my line. I don't like it, but I'll take it, provided they ain't any snakes in the deck."

"Did I ever run a crooked game?" Maunders demanded with an injured frown that faded into his patronizing smile. "Deal straight an' keep yore hardware handy, an' that's all they is to it, kid. Be back around two o'clock, to take the afternoon shift."

Tobe left Maunders and headed out to stable his horse. On the way through the saloon he passed a number of men whose shady pasts were well known to him, and who greeted him with varying degrees of familiarity. Bob was surrounded by his old gang, all right, and as he swung into his saddle, Tobe decided that while in Bonita he'd keep his back away from dark alleys.

An hour later Tobe took his place behind a faro lay-out in the Saddle Horn. Maunders slipped up, whispered a cryptic message in his ear, and disappeared in the crowd filling the barroom. Tobe was still arranging his case and the cards when Maunders returned, a friendly arm about the shoulder of a florid-faced man whose soft hands and tricky attire stamped him as a gambler. With the gambler swaggered a pair of hard-eyed hombres who wore their guns tied low.

"My friend, Dan Conklin," Maunders beamed with a wink at Tobe as the big gambler flopped into a chair in front of the layout. "Dan jest blew in from Montana, an' he's been cleanin' every house in town."

Maunders' benign smile widened. "I warn yuh, kid, he'll bust the bank if yuh ain't careful!"

Dan Conklin was not the cold, subtle type. Loud and profane, he smacked highly of the four-flushing tinhorn and would have been considered just that but for the fact that his luck was phenomenal and was six-backed by as sure a gun-hand as ever closed on a .45. Liquor was Conklin's chief Nemesis, and being flush with cash, he had wisely provided himself with a bodyguard. Tobe saw that the pair he had hired to watch his purse and person were riff-raff, products of the honkatonks and boom-town dives, and all three were half drunk. Tobe smiled with professional good nature as the others sat down to the game.

A half hour passed uneventfully, then Conklin, who had been drinking steadily, lost a large sum on a straight-up bet. Without warning one of the bodyguard shoved back his chair and made a grab at the tally wires on Tobe's case.

"Yuh pulled two cards, an' juggled them buttons!" he snarled. "Lessee them cards—!"

Conklin and the other sprank from their chairs, and Tobe was on his feet with the effortless ease of a cat. "Take it easy, gents," he said calmly. "This here game's—"

"Crooked as hell, an' yo're crookeder!" Conklin bellowed. "An' by God, I'll shoot yo're sneakin' heart out!"

There was no time to argue, and Tobe knew it. Four hands streaked holster-

ward, and four guns flashed into view. But as if by a miracle, only one of them spoke. Tobe's gun roared thrice so rapidly the barroom rang with one continuous thunder. One of the bodyguards spilled over backward, the other slumped across the table, and Conklin sank to his knees, pawing dazedly at the place where blood streamed from his shoulder.

Maunders dashed through the stunned mob and stopped aghast when he beheld the three men sprawled before his calm-faced dealer. The saloonkeeper came out of his spell with a blistering oath and grabbed Tobe by the arm.

"Come on!" he barked, and dragged him back toward the office. "Yuh damn block-headed fool," he snarled when the door closed behind them. "What was the idea of that dumb play?"

"What was I goin' to do?" Tobe demanded coldly. "Stand there an' let 'em drill me? I didn't want to nail 'em, but I had to work so fast I couldn't be choosey."

"To hell with that!" Maunders raged. "Who cares about a couple damn tinhorns? I told yuh to play Conklin easy, didn't I? He's flush, an' he's a chump when he's drunk, an' we could of cleaned him for ten thousand easy!"

"That ain't my style, mister," Tobe shot back angrily. "What's more, I didn't brace that deal. I ain't dealt a crooked card yet, an' I ain't startin' now!"

Maunders, black with rage and chagrin, did not appear to hear him. "Yuh cost me ten thousand dollars. Now git the hell out o' here. Yo're fired! An' yuh better make yoreself scarce, or a feller name of Hawley'll show yuh what real gunplay looks like!"

CHAPTER TWO

Maverick Brand

WHITE-LIPPED, Tobe toyed with an impulse to bend his gun-barrel over Maunders' head. But the saloonman, sensing that he was treading on thin ice, backed off and flung two gold-pieces on the table.

"Yore wages," he snarled.

"To hell with it!" Tobe swept the money to the floor, jerked open the door and strode out into the barroom.

Looking neither left nor right, Tobe crossed the street and entered the Bison Bar. That an attempt to arrest him would be made he had no doubt, but he didn't intend to leave Bonita. What he had done, he had done in self-defense, and no man could gainsay him that right.

Word of what had happened at the Saddle Horn flew over Bonita with amazing rapidity, considering that gunplay had become an integral part of the town's daily life. Two startling facts prompted this wide-spread interest—Tobe's identity, and the ease with which he had dropped three men before they could pull a trigger.

Old-inhabitants of Bonita sniffed and shook their heads. That young Breckenridge kid, eh? Come home a killer? Well what could a body expect? None o' his family was no good.

Tobe hung over his glass at the Bison until the eyes of the curious began to irritate him. Dropping one of his last coins on the bar, he left the saloon and headed aimlessly down the street. A block from the Bison he stopped in his tracks. Standing before him in front of the Bonita National Bank was a brown-eyed young woman.

Time rolled back like a curtain. For an instant Tobe was a solemn-faced youth again, hopelessly in love with a girl beyond his reach. Her father, a respectable merchant, frowned sternly on the ragged cub of a scapegrace family.

Tobe stepped forward slowly, and the old feeling he had kept submerged in the swift current of the past six years swept over him again. "Howdy, Myrt," he said,

removing his hat. "Gee—I'm glad to see yuh again."

Myrt Harris moved forward and stopped, color draining from her cheeks. "Hello, Tobe," she said in a voice that became increasingly husky. "I—I was beginning to think I'd never see you again."

"I been aimin' to come back," he replied, drinking thirstily every detail of her beauty. "But I've been busy."

"Doing what?" The girl, who had waited years to know the truth, and had learned it with shocking suddenness, blurted the question before she could check herself.

"Why—uh—" Tobe faltered as he became aware of the change in Myrt's eyes. They were deep pools of misery, and suddenly he knew why— She must have heard already of the affair at the Saddle Horn. "Why—I been punchin' cows," he evaded clumsily. "That is, I been down on the Border, an' all around. How's yore mother an' dad?"

"You're lying." The girl spoke slowly, without emphasis, but the flat statement seemed to chill the sweltering afternoon. "The stories I've heard are true. You're a gambler—and a gunman. You were ashamed to come back."

Tobe stiffened like a ramrod, his face scarlet. "I ain't ashamed!" he blurted the truth. He wasn't, and his reasons for not being were forthright and honest. "An' I ain't a gunman!"

"No?" Myrt's voice was cold; her eyes contemptuous. "What are you?"

"I'm—I'm—*me!*" Tobe stammered, at loss for an answer. "What if I do gamble? Doesn't everybody, includin' yore own father? I ain't crooked, an' that's more'n yuh can say for some o' these who calls themselves honest business men!"

"Possibly." Myrt shrugged, offering no denial. "But honest or dishonest, they don't settle their arguments with a six-shooter."

"Most of 'em would like to, but they're too much rabbit!" Tobe replied vehemently. "An' if yo're referrin' to those hombres at the Saddle Horn, it was me, or them. I had to do it—"

"Of course you had to do it," she cut him off. "You used your gun because it was part of your job. You were paid to do it. A gunman doesn't care who he shoots, or why, as long as he gets his money."

"Myrt, look here!" Tobe's face was blazing. "Don't yuh see—"

"No," she said quickly, "I don't. Nothing that dad or anyone else used to say ever made any difference—I loved you. But that time is gone. Goodbye." Myrt turned back toward the door of the bank. "I—I'm sorry you came back now. I know the truth—and I hate it!"

ANGER and humiliation choked in Tobe as he watched the girl sweep through the doorway to disappear within the bank. His eyes chanced upon, "John Harris, Pres.," inscribed in gold letters on one of the bank's windows, and his lip curled. The gold-rush had been kind to the Harris family. Myrt's father had risen from selling handfuls of beans to the presidency of a bank.

"Gunman!" Tobe exploded bitterly. "An' I git paid for it! I'd jest like to know how many miners that old buzzard sand-bagged to sit hisself up in a bank!"

Turning on his heel, Tobe headed rapidly toward where his horse was stabled. Angered, and cut to the core, a wretched loneliness engulfed him and he wanted to ride. To hell with Bonita; he suddenly knew of a dozen better towns.

Occupied with his tumultuous emotions, he failed to note the gray-haired man who padded along in his wake until the oldster tapped him gingerly on the arm. "Yo're Tobe, ain't yuh?"

Tobe spun like a top, his eyes alert and

dangerous. "Yeh," he snapped. "An' what the hell about it?"

"I'm Pete Smith," the old man said, backing away timidly. "Don't yuh remember me?"

Tobe shot him an appraising look, and after a moment, jerked his chin in assent. Pete Smith had been the local jailer for twenty years, and had always had a soft spot in his heart for the wild Breckenridges, probably because they were so often in his keeping.

"Shore, Pete," Tobe clipped out coldly. "Howdy. What yuh want?"

"Well—uh—they jest want to see yuh down at the courthouse," Pete replied scarily.

Tobe's face froze. "Want me? For what?" he demanded harshly.

"Why—they jest want to see yuh about somethin', I reckon," the old fellow stammered. "An' they want yuh to come peaceful. That's why I ain't wearin' no gun."

Tobe spat an oath. Sending old Pete Smith after him without a gun! Then the ironic humor of the thing struck him and he laughed. "Foxy bunch running this town, ain't they?" he said, taking the old man's arm. "Figgered if they sent a bear-killin' marshal after me, they'd be gun smoke." He laughed again. "All right, Pete, you take me in. But after we git there, keep out o' the way, because if they aim to stick me for defendin' myself—well, keep yourself scarce, because I always liked yuh."

Arriving at the courthouse, Pete led the way into a stuffy office in which sat three grimly silent men. One of these arose quickly with a short nod at Pete, who vanished, closing the door behind him.

"Dodd's my name," the man said without preliminaries. "I'm mayor o' Bonita." He jerked his head toward the other two. "This is Judge Singer, an' Town Clerk Tate. Set down, won't yuh, Breckenridge?"

Tobe knew none of the men; evidently they had come to Bonita after his departure. And all three of them wore guns, rather unusual for men in their official positions.

"No, thanks. I talk better standin'."

The mayor nodded and cleared his throat with a trace of nervousness. "Mebbe yo're wonderin' why we sent for yuh," he said. "Well—I was in the Saddle Horn when that shootin' took place this afternoon—"

Tobe drew a deep breath and braced his feet. "Shore," he nodded. "So was I."

"I saw what happened," Mayor Dodd went on quickly. "An' I was sittin' back at a poker table an' I heard what Maunders had to say about it. Breckenridge—" the mayor stopped and licked his lips—"was yuh ever a marshal?"

"I've met a couple," Tobe answered, his eyes intent upon the mayor's face.

"Yuh won't meet one in Bonita," Dodd replied. "We haven't got one, an' we're offerin' yuh the job."

TOBE'S jaw dropped, and he stared at the mayor in astonishment. "Me?" he gasped. *"Me?* For what?"

"For the best salary a marshal ever got paid," the mayor returned, banging his desk for emphasis. "From what I saw, I know there ain't a man in town can top you with a gun. An' from what I heard, by God, Breckenridge, I believe yo're square!"

The look of bewilderment on Tobe's face brought Judge Singer into the affair hurriedly. "We think yo're square, or we wouldn't have sent for you," he reiterated Dodd's statement. "We need you, and we need you badly. We've been without a marshal nearly a week, and there isn't another man in town capable of handling

the job. Possibly you aren't—but, by thunder, we believe you are!"

"Exactly," the mayor declared firmly. "Bonita's full o' the worst gang o' criminals in the West, with a new batch pilin' in daily, an' they've got to be cleaned out! Why, a respectable man ain't safe on the street after sun-down." He patted his six-shooter. "I wouldn't think o' steppin' out o' my house without this. Three stores robbed already this week, an' there've been more hold-ups than yuh can count. It's a tough job, but we're willin' to pay for it," and he named a sum that made Tobe's pulse leap. "What say, Breckenridge?"

Tobe studied the flaming evening sky through the open window and slowly rolled a cigarette. The money offered was enough to make anyone's pulse leap—and there was something else. Something Tobe wanted more than anything in the world.

Narrow-eyed, he stared at the tip of his cigarette. A gambler and a gunman, huh? Tobe's jaw set itself with a snap.

"All right," he said, and lit his smoke. "Gimme a badge."

"Good boy!" The mayor, his broad face beaming, grabbed Tobe's hand and pumped it heartily. "Come on, Judge," he rejoiced. "Swear him in!"

In short order and with little ceremony, Tobe was sworn in as marshal of Bonita. There was a brief pause while Mayor Dodd fumbled through a drawer in his desk and brought out a shiny bit of metal. Grimly silent, Dodd handed it to Tobe. It was a star—an ill-fated star—that had been worn by two men who now slept out in the parched little graveyard.

"Don't know what yuh'll do for deputies, Marshal," Dodd said with a worried frown. "Yuh shore as hell need a couple, but I don't know anybody good enough to hold down the jobs."

"I'll pick up a couple, all right," Tobe assured him, pinning the star to his vest. "Just wait till I see who's in town."

"Good," the mayor nodded approval. "There ain't any special orders or laws to carry out, Breckenridge. It's mostly up to you. This shootin' an' killin's got to stop, an' anyway you see fit to stop it suits us fine."

"And something else," Judge Singer put in gravely. "As you probably know, Jack Maunders and that Hawley fellow are the ringleaders, and they aren't going to take this with their hands folded." The judge paused and cleared his throat uneasily. "And it's no more than fair to tell you—they were responsible for the deaths of our last two peace officers."

There was a moment of uncomfortable silence. Dodd coughed and fumbled clumsily with his heavy hands. "Shore," he admitted, dropping his eyes, "yuh ought to know. Hawley beat one to the draw, an' some o' his gang dry-gulched the other."

Dodd broke off abruptly as a sudden, staccato burst of gunfire rolled down from the upper end of town. The three town officials stiffened, their eyes seeking Tobe's face.

Twilight was stealing softly through the cottonwoods outside the courthouse window. Another burst of shots, the roll of hoofs and a swelling chorus of hilarious shouts. A bunch of punchers, playfully drunk, shooting up the town. Tobe grinned in response to the searching looks of the mayor and his associates, and turned on his heel.

"Can't tell," he said, opening the office door, "mebbe they'll be responsible for the death o' another. Adios, gents. Seems like duty's callin' me."

CHAPTER THREE

Dead Man's Warning

STILL grinning, Tobe made his way from the courthouse to the main

street. Mayor Dodd's action, while surprising, was not unusual. Many a man, professedly a gunman of evil repute, had ridden into a town where, upon demonstrating his ability to spread death, he found himself beseeched by desperate officials to clean up the very town he had terrorized. And Tobe, considering himself anything but a gunman, looked upon his marshalship as a means to an end that bulked large in his new-found scheme of things.

At the foot of the street he stopped for a moment to mull over a plan of action he had evolved. And as he regarded the street filled with boisterous punchers, swirling dust and yellow shafts of light from saloons and dance halls, his brows grew together thoughtfully. He knew what he was bucking.

Tobe tugged at his hat and started up the street. The plan he had formulated was simple and direct. One that would bear fruit of one kind or another quickly, and with characteristic directness he put it to test.

Entering the first saloon he came to, he shoved his way to the bar and rapped lustily on it with his knuckles. "Gents," he announced. "I've got somethin' to say to you all." The men liquoring themselves in preparation for the night turned in sharp annoyance. "In case yuh don't know it," Tobe went on, "my name's Breckenridge, an' I'm the new marshal."

A grunt of half-interested surprise swept the saloon and Tobe continued. "I ain't aimin' for no Sunday-School picnics, an' I know yuh ain't either. Fair enough. Accordin'ly, they ain't goin' to be any rules agin packin' guns. Not yet, anyways. But get this—they ain't goin' to be any more gunplay in this town. Understand? Wear yore guns, but keep 'em in leather. That's all, boys."

Without waiting, Tobe turned and strode out the door, leaving the roomful of men staring after him in amazed unbelief. In quick succession he visited half a dozen bars, delivering the same speech and departing as speedily. Next on the list was Jack Maunders' Saddle Horn.

Entering unnoticed, he mounted a convenient chair and addressed the crowd. The effect was startling, as he had intended it to be. Maunders, glowering in astonishment from the door of his office, snarled an oath and kicked the door shut with a bang. Hawley lounging at the foot of the bar laughed derisively. A score of others stared in shocked surprise a moment, then were ominously silent. Apparently unaware of the tension, Tobe stepped from the chair and went out.

In less than twenty minutes roaring, bawdy little Bonita was buzzing like a beehive. Stop gunplay? Who's goin' to stop it? Breckenridge? Bob Hawley roared and slapped his sides. Wait an' see!

A distance up the street Tobe ran into a pair of rather forlorn-looking individuals whose appearance had nothing to do with their real worth. Both were Border men and Tobe knew them well. Stuffy Bill and Joe Upton were square-shooting gents who performed excellently with .45's.

"Well, if it ain't that hell-roarin' new marshal!" Stuffy Bill exclaimed, grinning widely when he caught sight of Tobe. "What'd they do, trail yuh up here special for this job o' town-tamin'?"

"Not exactly," Tobe returned the grin. "But they's considerable tamin' to do. You fellers workin'?"

"Workin'?" Upton moaned. "Why, we been stompin' around here for a month lookin' for a job an' we—"

"Got one right now!" Tobe finished for him. "Looks like I'll need help, an' I don't know anybody I'd rather have than you boys. What say?"

Stuffy cast a sidelong glance at his pardner and cocked an ear to the rising

crescendo of cow-town hilarity. Both men knew what accepting the offer meant. They looked at each other and grinned. "Swear us in," Joe nodded. "When do we commence upholdin' the law?"

"Pronto," Tobe replied. "Yo're both deputized, here an' now. Go down to the courthouse an' tell the mayor who you are, an' then come back an' meet me around here somewhere."

HIS two deputies departed for the courthouse and Tobe started toward the Green River, a gambling joint across from the Saddle Horn. Shoving his way through the close packed crowd, he had gone no more than a block when two sudden shots rang out from the Saddle Horn.

Tobe stopped short, his face grim. The crowd around him halted and fell back abruptly, sensing that the test had come. From its midst came a contemptuous laugh. Tobe slid his gun up and down in its holster and turned swiftly toward the Saddle Horn. His first and only edict had been broken by the very outfit he had known would break it.

Hat tipped over his eyes, Tobe swung open the door of the Saddle Horn and the subdued rumble that filled the place died out abruptly. In the middle of an open space on the floor lay a man, face down in a widening circle of blood, his gun still in his holster. A few feet from the body Bob Hawley, backed by half a dozen bravos, stood as though awaiting someone's arrival.

"Who did it?" Tobe's tone was as impersonal as the prairie wind.

There was a short moment of silence, then Hawley shifted his right hand slightly and cracked out the answer: "I did."

"Why?"

"He went for his iron," Bad Bob snarled. "An' what the hell yuh goin' to do about it?"

Tobe hadn't stopped walking since entering the door and was within three feet of the badman when he spoke.

"Throw yuh in jail," he replied calmly. "An' see yuh hang to the highest tree in the state if yo're guilty."

"Hang *me!* Lissen to him!" he bellowed. "A damn faro dealin', sleeve-gun skunk talkin' about hangin' *me!*"

Without removing his eyes from the gunman Tobe sensed the gradual tensing among the hand-picked killers. As if they only awaited the signal to go into action.

"I ought to shoot you down where you stand," he said with tantalizing slowness. "But I'll give yuh a chance, an' let yuh tell it to a jury—"

Hawley's contorted face went black with savage fury. *"You'll* give me a chance?" he roared. "Why, yuh damn—!"

Hawley drove his hand downward and Tobe moved with all the speed in his lithe body. As Tobe's gun snaked from its holster, his left hand grabbed Hawley by the collar and spun him around with a force that hurled the gun from the badman's grasp. And at the same instant his own gun frowned .41 calibre death at the middle of Hawley's men.

"Drop 'em!"

Tobe snapped out the order and yanked Hawley around in front of him as a shield. There was a shaved second of bewildered silence, then the half drawn guns of Hawley's crew slid back into their holsters.

Tobe had won, but only by an infinitesimal margin, and he knew better than to overplay his hand. He tightened his grip on Hawley's collar and backed swiftly for the door, dragging him along.

"That's jest the beginnin'," Tobe warned, his gun trained on the stunned group. "An' the first one of you that makes a move is headed for boot hill."

Tobe swung his prisoner out through the door, prodded Hawley off the porch and headed down the street at a trot.

The dumbfounded crowd rubbed its eyes and gasped. Bob Hawley being chased off to jail like a soused sheep-herder!

At the jail, behind the courthouse, Tobe kicked on the door and shoved Hawley, raging and cursing, inside when Pete opened up for him.

Tobe eyed the heavy adobe walls of the little jail with satisfaction and shoved Hawley into the one large cell, slamming the barred door quickly.

"Keep that door locked," Tobe said grimly to Pete. "Wear yore gun day an' night, an' if he even breathes crooked, don't be squeamish. I got to go round up some witnesses."

Hawley screamed his rage. After years of boasting he had finally met Tobe in a showdown with the deck stacked against Tobe, and had been man-handled like a green pilgrim. And to make it worse a whole town he had bullied had witnessed his disgrace.

"Witnesses?" he roared. "Witnesses? For what?"

"For a murder trial," Tobe replied calmly and walked out of the jail.

IF BONITA had buzzed before, it was ready to explode now. With the arrest of Hawley, scoffing ridicule turned to savage resentment. The new marshal meant business and the town knew it. But marshal or no marshal, the horde of punchers in for their spree swore in whisky-inspired ugliness to raise all the hell they wanted to, or go out with their boots on in the attempt.

And if the anger of the rangemen was hot, the murderous rage of the tough element, many of whom Tobe had rubbed shoulders with in other towns, knew no bounds. Without stopping to question it they had considered him one of themselves. Therefore, the moment the marshal's star touched his vest he had become not only a hated enemy, but a traitor whose treason was answerable only with death.

Tobe sensed the brittle tension that engulfed the town the moment he struck the main street. Alert, but apparently heedless, he moved along until he found Stuffy Bill and Joe Upton.

"Evenin', officers." He grinned at the deputy's badges glinting on their vests. "How's business?"

"Wouldn't be surprised if it turned out to be damn good," Upton replied dryly with a narrow glance at the milling crowd. "Been hearin' some war-talk, Tobe. What's our orders?"

"Use yore heads, mostly," Tobe replied. "Don't bother anybody jest havin' a good time. I figger the smart thing's to start tamin' 'em easy. But if they's any sign o' gunplay, land on 'em fast."

Two men brushed past the officers, hesitated an instant, then disappeared quickly in the crowd. "Grubber Mike, an' Hank Small, o' Hawley's gang," Stuffy snapped softly, his eyes alert as they followed the two men. "Better keep an eye open, Tobe. They looked damn disappointed at not findin' yuh alone."

"Don't worry," Tobe jerked his chin grimly. "I know that outfit backwards."

With one eye on the crowd, Tobe crossed the street and went into the Saddle Horn. The saloon was full, and already noisily oblivious of the tragedy that had occurred a few minutes before.

Despite that fact, the place was in the grip of an electric, growing tension that seemed to seep in from the dusty street. And as he moved through the crowded barroom in search of witnesses, Tobe suddenly came face to face with something highly significant. Maunders was conspicuously absent, and so were the members of the gang.

A quick, sharp feeling of uneasiness nudged Tobe. A mess of hell was sure cooking somewhere.

More alert than ever he left the saloon, his face grim. A part of the grimness came from the fact that apparently no one in the Saddle Horn had seen Bob's shooting spree. The truth was, no one was willing to risk the murderous ill-will of the Maunders-Hawley gang.

For an hour or more Tobe prowled the town in a fruitless search for witnesses. Once he made a trip back to the jail to assure himself that all was well there. He met and talked with Stuffy and Joe two or three times, and each time the faces of the deputies seemed a little more set. Both men were jerky and nervous.

In spite of himself, Tobe began to tighten under the strain of the intangible breathlessness that was closing down on Bonita. Pianos banged and men whooped as they surged from resort to resort, but there was an unnatural note in the riotous uproar. Sharp and clear as a clarion call, an angry, rebellious overtone rose steadily in the pandemonium swelling up into the night. Close-eyed and taut, Tobe stepped from the sidewalk in front of a dance hall to cross the street, and then, without warning, the stunning climax came.

A livid tongue of flame darted from a dark space between two buildings directly across the street, and a bullet snatched Tobe's hat from his head.

Instinctively Tobe grabbed for his gun and hurled himself to the ground. It was an act that saved his life as a rendering broadside blazed across the street and smashed into the dance hall behind him. Lead from four guns churning the earth, he yanked his iron and rolled to one knee. He knew that he was trapped. Caught in the full glare of light streaming from the dance hall, his chances of living ten seconds were one in a thousand.

HIS gun bawled once, and as though the shot had released them, the hidden assassins bounded out into the open like a quartet of charging buffalo. Tobe sprang desperately to his feet to meet the onrush, and nearly dropped his gun in astonishment as Stuffy Bill's yell rang out from the dark space across the street.

Cursing, the ambushers scattered and sprinted wildly for safety, and Tobe didn't stop to ask questions. As relentlessly as though he were shooting at tin cans he swung down on the scattering quartet. Still yelling, Stuffy darted out into the open, his gun blazing. And from down the street Joe Upton burst onto the scene, pumping lead at every jump.

For thirty seconds the street rocked as though a battery of field guns had been turned loose. Then abruptly the firing ceased. Gunsmoke drifted lazily toward the stars and four men lay motionless in the hoof-churned dust. There was a moment of choking silence when the street was as still as the desert. Joe and Stuffy walked up to Tobe, ejecting the empties from their guns.

"Good thing I seen 'em sneak down that alley," Stuffy said gruffly.

Tobe reloaded in silence and walked out to examine the men in the street. They were dead.

Stunned quiet gripped the town. The crowd packing the hushed street above and below the scene of battle melted away in numbed silence. Marshal Breckenridge's campaign for peace and quiet was taking hold admirably.

Deep in the back room of the Saddle Horn Jack Maunders raved and cursed like a madman. His murder plots had failed miserably. Four of the gang dead, and Bad Bob in jail!

"Lissen!" Maunders raged to the hard-eyed men assembled. "Two things we got to do! We got to have Bob, an' we got to git that dirty son of a kioty, Breckenridge! We got to, an' by God, we will, if I have to do it alone!"

CHAPTER FOUR

The Law Stumbles

WHEN Tobe awoke it was with a vague feeling that somewhere all was not as it should be. Rising quickly from his bunk in the jail office, he strode out to Hawley's cell to find the badman safe and sound and profanely abusive.

Tobe grinned caustically. "I'm just fixin', Bob, to eat that breakfast you promised me I wouldn't."

"Well, by God!" Hawley swore. "Yuh ain't et it yet, an' don't be so damn shore yo're goin' to either! They's boys in this town—"

"Uh-huh," Tobe said dryly, turning toward Pete who had crawled hastily from his blankets at the sound of voices, "but they's four less this mornin' than they was last night."

Sudden fear sucked the color from Bob's face. "What the hell!" he blurted. "Who?"

Tobe ignored him, returning to the office. Stuffy and Joe were awake, hats on, gun belts buckled, pulling on their boots.

"Joe, yuh stick around here with Pete," Tobe ordered. "That skunk out there seems too damn certain about somethin' an' it's a cinch Maunders ain't goin' to take this layin' down. Yuh can take a whirl around the main stem after yuh eat, Stuffy. I got to go see the judge."

Tobe crossed the fifty yards from the jail to the back door of the courthouse and entered to find the mayor and Judge Singer just arriving for the day.

"By the gods o' war!" Dodd lumbered forward, amazement and admiration written in every line of his heavy face. "I knew yuh was good, but yore ten times better'n I ever drempt! Arrestin' Bob Hawley!" The mayor stopped and shook his head in open-faced wonder. "Boy, the law-abidin' citizens o' this town owe yuh their shirts!"

"And their lives," Judge Singer added earnestly. "Now, if we can get that Maunders scoundrel, the rest of the blacklegs can be handled summarily. We'll shove Hawley's trial through at top speed, and if we don't get a hanging verdict, I'll miss my guess! How many witnesses have you, and are they reliable?"

"Ain't got any," Tobe answered bluntly. "They're all scared. Nobody'd even admit they was in the joint."

Disappointment and sharp concern flooded the judge's face. Dodd swore heatedly and banged a heavy fist down onto his desk.

"But we got to have 'em!" the mayor protested. "No matter how guilty Hawley is, we might's well turn him loose now as to hold him for trial if we ain't got any witnesses!"

Tobe settled his hat more firmly on his head. "I'll git some if I have to throw a gun on 'em an' drag 'em in!"

"No, no. Don't do that!" Judge Singer hastened to warn as Tobe stalked determinedly toward the door. "Just try to convince them that from now on there's nothing to fear from Hawley and Maunders."

Bathed in the flood of the morning sun Bonita seemed as peaceful as a mission garden as Tobe made his way up the main street. Yet swift and certain, forces were rising up to strike a death blow at law and order.

Deeply immersed in the problem at hand, Tobe looked up suddenly and halted in mid-stride. Myrt Harris, calm and cool in a summery dress, stood almost under the brim of his hat. Myrt stepped back a pace, her brown eyes as cool as the frock she wore.

"Good morning," she said, coldly. "From what I hear, you did very well again last night."

Tobe opened his mouth to speak but the words stuck in his throat. Involun-

tarily his hand gestured toward the star on his vest.

"Certainly," she agreed, "you're a marshal now. But what difference does that make? You're still being paid for it, aren't you? You've just sold your trigger finger to the highest bidder, that's all. You're the deadliest gunman in town, and that's why they gave you the job. It's the old story of 'fight fire with fire'—or setting a thief to catch a thief."

TOBE'S face was scarlet; he gulped and said nothing as John Harris appeared suddenly at Myrt's side and took her arm. Myrt's father was a nervous, gray little man, righteous and coldly austere. He looked at Tobe once and his thin lips tightened. It was obvious that he not only shared his daughter's abhorrence of a gunman's calling, but went far beyond that. Tobe was one o' them Breckenridges, and he was Banker Harris.

"Mornin'," the little man sniffed distantly and tightened his grip on Myrt's arm protectingly. "Come up to the bank, Myrt. I need you to help with the figures on the gold shipment."

As though Tobe were non-existent, father and daughter turned away toward the Bonita National Bank. A few steps and Harris called authoritatively over his shoulder: "I told Dodd to have you handy with a strong guard when the gold goes out today, an' I'll expect you to be there. Go see him, an' get yo're orders."

That was all, and it was more than enough. Tobe stood as though spiked to the board sidewalk. He had accepted the marshal's job chiefly because he thought it would prove to Myrt he was not the unscrupulous gunman she held him to be. Instead, it seemed to have intensified her feeling.

Anger and indignation rocked Tobe from boot heels to scalp lock. For a moment he glared after the vanishing pair, then in one furious gesture, he ripped the star from his vest. From the instant Myrt had greeted him he had been prepared to fling his badge into the street and ride out of Bonita as he had started to the day before. His hand was poised to throw the badge when his mouth closed with a stubborn snap. To hell with that! He was being paid an honest sum for doing an honest job, and he'd continue doing it. If Myrt Harris couldn't tell the difference between a gunman and a gun-fighter, she undoubtedly would be as short-sighted in other respects. Tobe pinned the star back onto his vest and strode rapidly up the walk.

In the center of town he met with a situation that was highly gratifying and acted as something of a sop for his outraged feelings. His exploits of the night previous had registered deeply with all the other inhabitants of Bonita. Worthy men greeted him warmly—the tough ones kept carefully at a distance.

No higher tribute could have been paid him, and realizing that confidence was springing up in place of fear, Tobe went to work gathering his witnesses. By noon he had a long list of reputable citizens who had seen the shooting and were willing to tell their story on the stand. In the opinion of all, Bob Hawley was guilty of cold-blooded murder. His opponent, drunk and only mildly quarrelsome, hadn't even reached for his gun. Well and good. Bob Hawley was headed straight for the gallows!

Brimming with good news for the judge and the mayor, Tobe went back down to the little courthouse, a half smile on his face. Despite the sting of the raw wound Myrt had given him, he was beginning to relish this law-enforcing business. In an eager mood, he entered the courthouse to find it empty and silent during the noon hour. Thinking of something he wished

to tell Joe Upton, he stepped out the back door—and froze in his tracks.

The door of the adobe jail was wide open, and Pete Smith, his frowsy old gray head covered with blood, lay crumpled in the doorway.

Tobe pulled himself out of his trance and dashed for the jail. One look at old Pete's twisted neck was enough to tell him that the jailer was dead. Gun in hand, Tobe stepped swiftly over his body and into the jail. Just inside the door Joe Upton was slumped against the wall, blood trickling from a gash above his right ear. The cell door was open, and Bob Hawley was gone.

For a moment Tobe stood still and cursed, then he grabbed a pail of water from the wash bench and doused Joe with it. Upton moaned and rolled over, pawing belatedly for his six-shooter.

"How did it happen?" Tobe demanded.

Joe opened his eyes and got to a sitting position, where he sat staring stupidly at the floor.

"Come on, feller, it's me!" Tobe shook him urgently. "Hawley's gone—how'd it happen?"

"Holy mackerel!" Joe straightened with a start. "Gone?" He stared across at the empty cell. "Well, I'll be damned!" he groaned. "Pete was settin' out by the door, an' I was in here. I heard a noise, an' I went to see what it was. I git this far an' I see three-four fellers comin' through the door, an' before I can draw one of 'em belts me with his gun. Grubber Mike was one of 'em, but it happened so quick I didn't git a look at the others."

Tobe rose quickly. "Damn good thing they didn't want to raise a ruckus," he snapped, turning toward the door, "or yuh'd be full o' lead. They got Pete anyways. Set tight. I'm going to hunt signs."

There was little trouble on that score. Four horses had been ridden up behind the jail, and the wide open trail of the same four animals, traveling at top speed this time, led toward the foothills.

TOBE read the signs at a glance. Three men, leading a spare mount, had sneaked in from the hills during the noonday lull, knocked over Pete and Joe, and unlocked the cell door with Pete's too-handy keys. After that there had been nothing to do but disappear into the hills. Grim-faced, Tobe retraced his steps hurriedly to the front of the jail in time to meet Mayor Dodd.

"Good God!" Dodd's face went white as he caught sight of old Pete sprawled in the doorway. "What's happened?"

"Hawley's busted jail," Tobe snapped. "Got Pete, an' banged up Joe."

Fear stood out on Dodd's bluff countenance. "What—what're we goin' to do?" he stammered.

"Git a posse an' round him up," Tobe replied. "An' we got to nail him before he gits back into the mountains. Once he holes up there, he's as safe as if he was down in Chihuahua."

Tobe started toward the main street on the run and Dodd halted him. "Wait a minute," the mayor mumbled distractedly. "They's a gold shipment goin' out today, an' Harris wants a guard. I forgot to tell yuh this mornin', but—"

Let me git hold of Hawley," Tobe cut him off cryptically, and kept on going. "Then yuh won't need no guard for that gold!"

Word of Bob's spectacular escape spread over Bonita like a prairie fire. Inspired by Tobe's recent action and whipped to high anger at the brutal slaying of old Pete, a dozen staunch men speedily answered the call for posse duty. And thirty minutes after the break Tobe was leading his band out of Bonita at a headlong pace. Upton was too badly hurt to travel, and Stuffy Bill rode second in command.

Grimly silent, the posse swept up over

the first ridge of foothills, pouring leather to their mounts. Hawley's trail, wide open and plain as day, led straight back toward the mountains. Then suddenly it vanished in the boulder-strewn bottom of a deep coulee.

There was a moment of confusion before Tobe, following a hunch, spurred up to the top of the second ridge, the rest of the posse streaming up after him. No sign or trail was in evidence. Tobe swore and prepared to drop back into the coulee. Below, and a quarter of a mile behind, Bonita sprawled in the blazing sun.

Like distant pops of thunder, a trio of shots rolled up through the molten air. Tobe spun in his saddle and looked back at Bonita.

The crowded main street they had just left was as empty of life as the open prairie. Empty save for a group of mounted men strung up and down the street in front of the Bonita National Bank. Two more shots rumbled up to the stunned posse on the hilltop, and Tobe whirled his horse with a yank that all but split the bronc's jaws.

Riding like the wind, the posse followed his plunge down the hillside. There was no need to ask questions. The answer was there in front of John Harris' bank, and so was Bob Hawley. Tobe had been duped as beautifully as the job could have been done. A shipment of gold going out, and the marshal and the town's best fighting men charging aimlessly around in the hills.

"Stuffy!" Tobe's face was strained and white. "Take half o' the boys an' come in from the upper end o' town. If we can ketch 'em before they ride, we got 'em between us!"

CHAPTER FIVE

Death Blow

NEARLY a score in number, Hawley's gang held Bonita actionless in the clutch of mortal terror. The thing was easy. Two shots from the outlaw's gun and a pair of clerks were stretched lifeless on the floor. A third toppled John Harris. Myrt sank down unconscious from a rough backhand blow.

The sacked dust, waiting to be transferred to the railroad station, was scooped up and swiftly carried out to the horses. Early in the procedure a kerosene lamp lighting the vault room was knocked to the floor. Weird blue flames began to dance across the darkened death chamber where lay two lifeless bodies. Hawley dashed from the bank with the last load and leaped into the saddle. With the dash of crack troopers, the gang wheeled and tore away down the street.

Tobe and the six men with him shot up to the top of the hills behind the jail and hurtled down into town like rockets. Swinging wide, they thundered into the lower end of the main street just as the robbers plunged away from the bank. A yell of surprise and a shower of hastily aimed lead cracked through the air. Bob spun his straining bronc, and shot back up the street, his gang following as fast as they could turn.

The sudden geyser of smoke and flame that shot skyward through the roof of the wooden bank building caused Tobe no concern, but his face had become grim as death. Stuffy and his half of the posse were nowhere in sight, and the robbers were already well up the street. Tobe stood in his stirrups and cracked down on the fleeing gang, futilely, for the movement of his racing horse wrecked his aim. A desperate oath started from his lips and died a-borning. Riding like sun-mad demons, Stuffy and his party burst into view at the upper end of the street.

Hawley's orderly retreat was instantly thrown into chaos. Caught between the two sections of the posse, the gang swung their horses and spurred wildly up over

the sidewalk, scrambling and fighting to squeeze out through the spaces between the buildings.

Success smiled suddenly on Bob Hawley. In a twinkling most of his gang had made good their escape, the buildings along the street protecting them perfectly. And as a parting salute a number of the robbers fired out at suddenly confused lawmen. Two of the posse flopped from their saddles, and Bob had an idea. Here was a chance to wipe out the one score he would have roasted his soul to wipe out.

"Come on! Come on!" he bellowed as he sprang from his horse and crouched alongside the Saddle Horn. "Knock 'em over, fellers! Pour it to 'em!"

Lead swept out into the street in a rising hail as more and more of the gang scrambled from their saddles and followed Hawley's example.

"Scatter! Damn it, scatter!" Tobe tried desperately to lift his voice above the roar of the guns as the two parts of the posse came together in a whirlpool of sliding broncs.

Every man for himself, the posse scattered and dived frantically for the protection offered by the open spaces further down the street. Lead ploughed into them from all angles, spilling riders and mounts, and before the maneuver was completed three more possemen were sprawled face up in the street.

Outnumbered and separated, the posse returned the robbers' raking fire with little effect. There was only one way Tobe might snatch victory from sickening defeat. Diagonally across the street from where he crouched the Bonita National Bank was blazing furiously, sending out clouds of heavy smoke that had begun to blanket the street.

"Look," he panted to the men crouched near him. "We got to git around behind 'em! Soon's this smoke gits a little heavier, we'll make a run for it—"

Tobe broke off in mid-word, his tongue clove to the roof of his mouth. Across the street a blurred figure suddenly loomed in the smoke filled doorway of the bank. It was Myrt. Her filmy gown grimed and smouldering in a dozen places, she lurched blindly and fell back inside the burning building.

Two of the men at his side grabbed at him frantically as Tobe sprang to his feet. "Yuh can't make it!" one of them yelled desperately, jerking his head toward the bullet-swept street. "Don't be a damn fool—"

The bank was a roaring furnace, the flames leaping higher and wilder with every second. There was no time to think; no time to hatch clever schemes. Thirty yards across the open street to the door of the bank.

NO WAVE of exalted heroism welled up to blind Tobe to the dangers ahead. But again for an instant he was a sad-faced kid willing to lay down his life for a brown-eyed little girl. Tight-lipped, he caught up a six-shooter from a fallen posseman, jammed his hat down on his head, and sprang out into the open.

A joyous howl went up from the region of the Saddle Horn and lead swept down the street as fast as the Hawley men could pump their guns. Ten feet from the flaming doorway of the bank Tobe ducked his head and dived headlong.

Landing just inside the door in a sprawling slide, he rolled to his knees, coughing and choking. The rear of the building was blazing with the fury of a blast furnace. Stinging, acrid smoke made breathing impossible.

He holstered one gun, shoved the other under his belt, and groped forward blindly on his hands and knees. Three crawling steps from the door he collided

with Myrt's inert body. Peering down through streaming eyes, he saw that her arms were locked under John Harris's shoulders. Regaining consciousness after Hawley's blow, she had dragged her sorely wounded father this far and had collapsed.

Fighting down a mad desire to fill his protesting lungs, Tobe tore her arms loose and rolled her toward the door. As he did so a ceiling beam, burned through, crashed floorward, bringing a section of the roof with it. Given added draught, flames that had only been smouldering leaped into raging sheets of fire that filled the doomed building with instant death.

Tobe made a quick lunge, picked up Harris's slight body with one hand and scooped up Myrt with the other. Another section of the flaming roof crashed behind him, and under the desperate circumstance he forgot the death waiting for him beyond the roaring flames. Myrt under one arm, her father under the other, he burst out into the street.

His lungs bursting for a breath of fresh air, Tobe was in the middle of the street before he realized he had played straight into Hawley's hands. He had dashed into the burning bank to come stumbling out, and into a gun-trap, gasping and blinded by smoke.

Nor had Hawley failed to see this heaven-sent opportunity. Even though Tobe had reached the bank without being shot down, the outlaw knew that he had his man. The charge that would wipe out Tobe would carry the bandit gang on out of town to the safety of the hills. Stuffy, crouched with a remnant of the posse, saw Tobe's predicament and strove desperately to save him, but Hawley was too quick. Before Stuffy could rally his men the howling gang swept out from their hiding places, spurs flying, guns flaming.

Roaring flames behind him, blazing guns hurtling down upon him. No turning. No escape. Tobe dropped the two limp forms he carried and snatched out his guns as the spearhead of the robbers' charge burst through the swirling fog of smoke. Blinded by the water pouring from his eyes, he leaped over the forms of the man and girl on the ground, straddling them to protect them from the oncoming horses.

Too late to stop the charge, Stuffy and a handful of possemen shot out into the open and smashed headlong into the flank of the racing bandits. Instantly the street was a heaving maelstrom as the gang, thrown into confusion by Stuffy's desperate flank attack, sought to blast Tobe into eternity.

Lead shrieked around him—horses, that were only blurry shadows in the eddying smoke, thundered past. The guns in his hands were drumming as fast as his frantic thumbs could fly, but as if by magic two bandits took the place of each one that went down.

Out of the chaos of smoke and riderless horses Hawley swept down with the speed of a thunderbolt. Tobe fired once without even knowing at whom he fired, and Hawley toppled backward with a crazy howl. The badman clung in the saddle an instant trying to bring his gun into play, then spilled to the ground.

JUST in time Tobe heard Stuffy's call and the whoop of familiar voices. He lowered his guns and stood peering helplessly through streaming, red-misted eyes as Stuffy and the rest of the posse smashed their way through the milling mob of smoke-blinded robbers. For one flaming minute the posse and the bandits fought it out gun to gun, then sensing defeat, panic seized the leaderless gang. They turned in flight but they turned too late.

A terrific burst of gunfire drowned out the other sounds of battle and then silence settled over the Bonita street. A gust of

wind puffed down from the mountains. Tobe dug futilely at his blistered eyes and breathed deeply of the fresh air.

Stuffy and the others returned from down the street, bringing half a dozen sullen, white-faced men with them.

"Well," Tobe tried a grin. "I reckon it was good while it lasted."

"Yuh damn right it was good," Stuffy replied grimly, eyeing Hawley's still figure, "an' to make it even better, one o' the boys got Maunders plumb center when he tried to do some shootin' from that rat-trap joint o' his."

Tobe suddenly sat down beside Myrt, blood from his wounds spreading darkly in the dust. "Must of got nicked," he apologized weakly as Stuffy bent over him hastily. "Git Myrt an' her dad into a doctor's hands, an' collect all the gold an' money these hounds lifted. G'wan!" he snapped when Stuffy hesitated to leave him. "It ain't nothin'. I'll jest set here an' rest a mite."

Awed and humble, the inhabitants of Bonita crept from their hiding places to stare at the quiet young man who sat alone in the street, his bloodless face cupped in his hands. A sighing, contented silence enfolded the scene and the lofty purple Ratans seemed to smile as they looked down on the hushed town.

* * *

And when twilight fell, Tobe, sitting on the vine clad porch of the Harris home, smiled back at the lazy mountain peaks. His wounds were painful but, so said the town medico, they would heal in short order. A cooling drink was at his right hand and he stretched and sighed contentedly.

"Myrt!" Mrs. Harris, tending her husband whose wound and exposure to fire and smoke had him in bed, called anxiously through the open window. "Are you takin' good care of Mister Breckenridge?"

Myrt, her hands and face bandaged to cover the burns she had sustained, rose slowly from her chair, a penitent, humble look in her brown eyes.

"Yes, mother," she replied, then lowering her voice, she spoke to Tobe. "I'm going to ask you again, and I want an answer," she said. "Why did you do what you did this afternoon—for dad and me?"

"Well," Tobe replied in a matter-of-fact manner, "I'm jest a gun-slingin' marshal, an' I do what I git paid for. Protectin' life an' property is jest part o' my job. But seein's as it ain't nowise a honorable occupation, I'm quittin' it."

"No! By thunder, you ain't!" Banker Harris exploded weakly from his bed near the open window. "I reckon yore home town needs you a lot worse'n you need it, but jest the same I aim to look after the interests o' Bonita. You keep that star on yore vest, an' I'll add a hundred a month to yore salary!"

Tobe grinned widely in the falling darkness. Myrt moved closer and placed her hand on his shoulder.

"That's the only reason?" she persisted.

"Well—" Tobe hesitated as though pondering deeply. "Come here a minute," he said at length.

Myrt leaned closer wonderingly and Tobe kissed her. "Now," he grinned, "what do you think?"

"I think," she answered softly, "that you oughtn't even speak to me. But I hope you kiss me again."

"Again?" He sighed. "An' again, an' again!"

And he did.

THE END

Range-War Novelette

GUNMAN'S

Men died swiftly and without warning in bullet-torn Cascade Valley. Yet Smiler Britt, the greatest Colt-slick of them all, turned down gunman's wages to champion the short-odds end of the ugliest war in range history.

SMILER BRITT parted the brush with the hungry barrels of two .45's, and set his long, hard body deep in the saddle for the rush into the open. He hoped the two riders who were pelting the twenty odd steers up the canyon, heading them out of the Ten of Hearts range, would take the drop. But Smiler doubted it. He knew them.

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GUNMAN'S HUNTING GROUND

By Cliff Farrell
(Author of "Death on the Pecos," etc.)

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"Well, either way, I'm goin' tuh roll

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(Author of "Death on the Pecos," etc.)

been high-grading his herd. The other reason was personal. Killing nauseated Smiler. But like the cattle the pair were hazing at a dust-lifting trot, the riders had the snort of the wild in their nostrils. They likely would call for a trigger showdown.

"Well, either way, I'm goin' tuh roll

the ball," Smiler decided. "Pin back yore ears, boys, an' place your bets."

He notched his palomino, and swept into the open.

"I've got a pat fistful," he howled. "They're all aces, totalin' twelve. Raise me an' I'll—"

He broke off with a half-sigh. "I was afraid of it," he gritted.

They weren't taking the drop. Monk Bremer already had jerked his six-gun. It blazed twice. Smiler gave him that much of a show, for the range was three hundred feet, and Monk was in a frenzied hurry. Monk was fighting a reputation instead of a man, for the Cascade Range had heard that Smiler Britt was a flash killer.

The slugs whined, but they didn't snap as they cut air in Smiler's vicinity. Bremer's haste was wasting good shells. Smiler took aim, and knocked Bremer from his horse with one through the shoulder.

"I'm a merciful cuss," Smiler shouted, veering his sights on Blackie Drake. "Lift 'em an' live, Blackie."

But Blackie was in action too. He was a heavier, slower, but more methodic man. His first bullet was close—too close. It snapped like a closing trap past Smiler's lean cheek.

Smiler's trigger-fingers were busy. Both his guns poured smoke and flame. He was drawing his bead belly-center. It was he or Blackie now, and Smiler was not ready to die. He had more business to complete in Cascade Valley.

Blackie got three bullets from his gun, but the last two were wild, for he was toppling, and grasping at sunbeams for vain support. He slogged to the ground limply. Blackie was one who wouldn't be taken alive.

Monk Bremer was not through yet in spite of his smashed shoulder. He had no wish to bleach away in prison. He had snaked to his .45. With a foot-high deadfall to shelter him, he was notching a sight with deadly concentration on Smiler's belt buckle. Smiler saw him in time to hurl himself aside an instant before Bremer cut loose. The bullet missed. Bremer fired again hurriedly as Smiler flopped down to the ground, and missed again.

Smiler bellied down, his guns bearing on the deadfall. "One . . . two . . ." he chanted, and pulled the triggers as he counted.

Bremer had chosen that instant to chance a quick glance from his shelter to locate his foe. The second bullet caught him between the eyes. He coughed, rolled over, to lie still forever.

Smiler arose. His body, panther-lean and rawhide-tough, began to feel the first tremors of the reaction.

"Hell's on the pop now," he muttered regretfully. But he had given them their chance. They had over-rated their cards.

"I'd have done the same, I reckon," he thought as he rounded up their horses.

He muscled their bodies across the saddles, and tied them down. He reloaded, then rolled a cigarette, with bronzed hands that had not yet steadied.

"Two more," he muttered. "By the time the tongue-wranglers get through with it they'll have ten more notches pinned on me."

He shrugged, but his face was bitter. Leading the burdened animals he headed back down the canyon, and out into the broad, descending benches of Cascade Valley. A range war was on the pop here. And it was a conflict in which Smiler had no interest, no favorite, and no sympathy. But old Loop Deshler was trying to pitchfork him into it.

"Maybe this will bring 'em to their senses," Smiler reflected.

YET he knew it was a vain hope. He had been in the Cascade only a month, but he had learned plenty. Loop

Deshler had brought him up from Texas, holding out as bait a veiled promise of either a partnership in the Ten of Hearts, or a start on a ranch of his own. Deshler had been an early trail-day saddle pard of Smiler's father. There had been a casual hint in the letter of some small rustling that would have to be stopped.

Smiler had learned early in the game that Loop Deshler had other things in his craw than merely putting the clamps on cow-stealing. Deshler wanted a fighting man, who didn't mind how he got his victims. Rustling was a minor issue in which Deshler was hardly interested.

Smiler knew now that Deshler's offer had not been based on any friendship of the past. It had been crafty business with Loop Deshler. For Smiler had rolled up an unwanted reputation below the Red River as a fighting man. He had rubbed out half a dozen hard-chinned rustlers in retaliation for the murder of his father and mother. That had been three years in the past. Three centuries it seemed to Smiler, because since then he had smoked it out on two occasions with vengeance-seeking relatives and pals of some of the deceased rustlers. Smiler was still alive. But all that it had earned him was the opportunity to sell his long-barreled guns to the highest bidder. Many men wanted fast guns in their service. Nobody that Smiler respected wanted him as a man.

And it was the same up here, a thousand miles from the Panhandle. Smiler was disillusioned, sick at heart, and out of tune with the world. He would cut loose from Loop Deshler tonight.

Dusk was deepening as he approached the sprawling Ten of Hearts spread from the creek timber. That suited Smiler, for it gave him a chance to tie up the horses with their grim burdens and ride in alone.

His jaws tightened as he swung down at the rack in front of the ranch-house. New horses were in the cavvy-yard, new faces were indistinct in the dusk against the bunkhouse above the ruby tips of cigarettes. The Ten of Hearts yard was crowded with silent, hat-tilted men who regarded him in stony silence and said nothing.

Trig Orsatti's bulky form blocked Smiler's path. Orsatti was range boss, and his dislike of Smiler always had been apparent, though glossed by silky tolerance. "Did yuh bring the mail?" Orsatti demanded.

"Didn't go to town last night," Smiler said with his lazy grin. "Changed my mind."

Orsatti blew on his cigarette. He was disturbed. "More gum-shoein', hey?" he asked, an edge in his voice.

"Looks like we got company," Smiler changed the subject. "When does the dance start?"

"Any time the Pee Wee scissorbills ask for it," Orsatti grinned. "Loop has hired some help for yuh in cleanin' up the valley."

"Bullet boys," Smiler nodded slowly. "I wondered how soon it would come to that. So Loop aims tuh blast from now on instead of borin'. How many of 'em?"

"Twelve. Pony Crile is their rod. Know him?"

"I've heard of him. They say he withers the grass he rides over. Where is he?"

"In the main house with Loop."

"I got news for Loop. Want tuh drag along, Orsatti? You might be interested too."

Orsatti appraised the younger man with the grinning mouth and the knife-blade eyes. Then the heavy, swart range boss ground out his cigarette and followed in silence.

Loop Deshler carried his sixty years defiantly. He stood six feet of raw-

boned, hide-bound, stubborn length. He had never asked quarter nor given any. Beneath his graying beard, his mouth quirked down at the corners, and his eyes looked at the world with chill suspicion. He had built up the Ten of Hearts to a size where it took a powerful amount of rustling to make even a ripple on the surface. And Deshler was not yet satisfied. He wanted more, more cattle, more range, more power.

"Meet Pony Crile," Deshler said gruffly, when Smiler entered. He indicated a white-shirted man with black sleeve-bands, who sat tilted in a chair beyond the direct flare of the table lamp. "What's on your mind, Britt?"

BRITT built a smoke while he studied Pony Crile. He was being similarly assayed. He judged that Crile could be as rapid as his reputation implied. Crile was in repose now, like a drowsy cat. Thin-faced, impassive and bleak of eye, except for his guns, he might have been a gambler, a cattle-buyer, or most anything. But he was pure devil.

"Got a line on the rustlin' that's been sappin' your fat stuff," Smiler said casually.

"The hell yuh have," Deshler boomed, surging to his feet. "About time yuh earned yore salt, Britt. Spill it."

"I laid out all night in Latigo Canyon instead of goin' tuh town for a drunk," Smiler explained. "I picked up two of 'em makin' a drive toward Saddlerrock Pass at noon tuhday."

"Well, yuh didn't set there an' let them Pee Wee blisters get away, did yuh?"

"I gave 'em their choice. They reached. But it wasn't their lucky day."

"That's the stuff. Who was they? I shore hope Dave Murdock was one."

Smiler shifted his position a trifle so as to bring Trig Orsatti within vision. "Hate tuh disappoint yuh, Loop," he drawled. "It wasn't any of the Pee Wee Pool. The fellas I ventilated was Monk Bremer and Blackie Drake—your own riders!"

The throbbing silence was broken by the scrape of a chair. Pony Crile had shoved back against the wall. He wore a cynical smile. His thumbs were hooked in his belt. He was moving out of line of fire. This wasn't Crile's wolf—yet.

Orsatti uttered a forced snarl of contempt. "I told yuh this lone-ridin' walloper had it up his sleeve for yuh, Loop," he barked at Deshler. "Now yuh'll believe what I told yuh about him pow-wowin' with Dave Murdock up in the hills the other day."

Smiler's grin widened a trifle. But his eyes did not reflect it. "So your riders was tailin' me that day too," he said. "Until last night I shore never got very far alone, did I?"

Loop Deshler went livid with rage. "Yo're admittin' that you've sold out to Murdock an' the Pee Wee Pool," he choked. "Why—"

"Don't jump so high at conclusions," Smiler snapped. "Yeah, I talked to Murdock. I'd spotted his kid workin' on some old mosshorns up in the slants with his maguey. Practicin'. But it ain't healthy for a twelve-year-old button to be tyin' down to a thousand-pound steer no time, no place, 'specially on a mountain-side. I told Murdock he better give permission for the kid to spill his loop on the calves around the ranch. Murdock told me to go to hell, and allowed that I could take you along with me, Loop. He's as mule-headed as you."

"Yore string don't run straight, Britt," Deshler said loweringly. "Yuh know what I think o' Dave Murdock. Him an' his Rollin' M are the backbone of the Pee Wee Pool, that's fenced me off from the trail tuh the shippin' pens. If you was whisperin' to him, I don't believe—"

"You wouldn't believe anything but a lie," Smiler cut in thinly. "That's because they always sound better. You don't give a whoop about rustlin', Loop. What you wanted was some bullet-slinger who'd dry-gulch Dave Murdock and the other rangatangs in the upper valley that've put a ring in your nose."

"You're fired!" Deshler howled.

Smiler grinned some more. "My connection with the Ten of Hearts ended five minutes ago," he said. "That was when I heard you'd put Pony Crile on the payroll."

Crile spoke for the first time. "Anything personal in that, Britt?" His voice was metallic, monotonous.

"Maybe I figure we wouldn't pull the same oar," Smiler said.

Smiler had enough trouble on his hands at the moment without reaching for more. Trig Orsatti was trying to edge farther back. He wanted an angle shot at Smiler. It was coming to a showdown.

"Yo're hintin' that some of my riders was rustlers," he grated. "That's smoke talk, fella."

"Didn't mean to hint," Smiler said softly. "I aimed to say it out loud. An' I wasn't cuttin' any strays. Loop, I tell yuh that *all* of your ridin' crew has been shovin' your best beef over the rim—an' that Orsatti would have tuh be wall-eyed, glandered to the ears an' dumber than he looks, not to know about it."

"You asked for it," Orsatti screeched, jerking his gun.

He thought he had Smiler cinched. Smiler would have to whirl partly around to bring his guns to bear. Orsatti was fast, and that split second ought to give him the big break.

It didn't. Smiler drew, whirled and sent a slug through Orsatti's thick middle as the range boss's gun cleared the leather. He was hurled against the front wall by the smash of the bullet. From there he folded to the floor, twitching in his death throes.

CHAPTER TWO

Teeth of the Wolf

LOOP DESHLER was leaning over the table, his lips working soundlessly, stunned by death's crashing entrance on the scene. But Pony Crile still sat tilted in his chair, his face masklike.

A babble of men's voices arose outside. Boots boomed on the veranda. Smiler's other gun sprouted in his palm.

"Where do you stand, Crile?" he asked.

"Neutral—until I get my orders."

"Call off your wolves then," Smiler gritted. "I'll take care of Orsatti's bunch." Then Smiler raised his voice. "The door is the deadline. Open it an' die."

"Everything is okay with me, Sandblast," Crile called. "We're not dealt in yet. Let the punchers whittle their own sticks."

Sandblast evidently was one of Crile's crew of bullet men. They retreated. But Orsatti's riders remained near the door. Smiler knew that he would leave the ranch-house only through gunsmoke.

Still he tarried. He had something he had been wanting to tell Loop Deshler for a long time. He looked at the harsh old rancher.

"Loop, yo're measurin' yourself for a coffin of misery," he said. "You can buy a right of way through the Pee Wee holdin's with money—but not with bullets."

"Don't preach to me!" Deshler roared. "Give them grave-robbin' blisters money for the right tuh drive this valley? Not in a million years, an' then some! I'll show 'em they can't fence the Ten of Hearts off from market."

"You made that boot, an' now it pinches when you have to wear it yourself," Smiler said. "You fenced them off first when

the only railroad was to the east o' the valley. You made 'em drive two hundred miles tuh the shippin' pens. Now your railroad has gone to rust, an' there's a new one right under the nose of the Pee Wee outfit beyond Cascade Pass. They're makin' yuh eat dirt. But it ain't too late tuh talk turkey to them. They've got families. They don't want war. They'll sell you a trail up the valley."

"It'll be over their graves," Deshler frothed. "I savvy yuh, Britt. You have sold out to Dave Murdock. You took my pay an' rode for him. You're not scalin' any weight with me with this hooraw about my own riders stealin' my beef."

"A few cattle doesn't mean anything to you," Smiler said, his voice harsh and biting. "It's land yuh want, Loop. You're pig-greedy an' wolf-hungry for more of it. This trail to market is your excuse. You're bringin' wolves into the valley, but you'll be the one that pays through the nose in the end. You're a bloody-minded, chisel-hearted old miser with a single-action mind an' not a grain of humanity in your—"

"You can say things like that to an old man," a girl's voice, shrill with anger interrupted him, "when you've got your murdering guns in your hands."

Lola Deshler, daughter of the Ten of Hearts owner, rushed from an inner door, to her father's side. She had come from her room. How long she had been standing there, Smiler did not know. Nor did he care much. Women had been few in his life, and, like every new rider, he had fallen in love with Lola Deshler at first sight. He had as promptly fallen back to normal after short acquaintance. She was twenty-two, had been to an Eastern school, and was frigidly beautiful, tall and blonde, with ideas that common cowhands should never approach the ranch-house except when summoned.

"I reckon it's time to drift," Smiler said. He moved nearer a window, and paused. "You're buying grief, Loop. Bullet money never bought anything else."

With a flirt of his gun barrels he smashed the glass from the frame and leaped into the darkness. A figure appeared at the corner, bellowed an alarm, and a gun plumed a roaring wink of red at him. But Smiler, bending low, was too fleeting a target. He went a hundred yards out into the darkness of the cottonwoods beyond the building. Other guns were coming to life as the pursuit took form. Smiler circled to the rear, rounded the bunkhouse at a dead run, and came around to the deserted front of the ranch-house where his horse stood.

A man leaped with a snarl of surprise from the shadows of the porch. Smiler saw the swish of cold steel in the starlight. He laughed exultantly, and flowed inside the descending knife. His gun barrel poled the fellow as though he had been struck by lightning. It was Mex Gonzales, a slippery half-breed whom Smiler detested.

Then Smiler was in the saddle and breezing through the creek brush beyond the corral, with futile lead clipping the willows over an area of a hundred yards. But none centered him or the horse.

Within an hour he had shaken off all pursuit, and was well up the flank of the Bluestones which walled in Cascade Valley to the south. South was the direction he wanted to head. He was leaving Cascade Valley to its range war. He had fulfilled his part as a rider for the Ten of Hearts. The valley could wade in its own blood, do its own killing, fang itself to death, for all he cared.

LOOP DESHLER, swearing in his beard, came ploughing back into the living-room, leaving the futile pursuit of Smiler to his riders.

"Why didn't you knock that blister

over," Deshler growled at Pony Crile, who still sat indifferently calm in his chair.

Crile lifted thin, colorless eyebrows. "Didn't know you wanted me to," he said.

"Yuh got your orders now."

Crile yawned. "We'll get him if he sticks in the valley."

"Dammit! Didn't yuh hear him? He'll stick. He'll be carryin' the torch for the Pee Wee Pool by tomorrow."

"That'll be his bad luck," Crile said without heat. "As I savvy it you want to tree this Dave Murdock first. Has he got any gun help?"

"Four hard-nosed riders of his own. They're salty. Three other smaller ranchers to back him up, each with a couple cow-crammers apiece that stand shoulder-deep with the Pool."

"What about your own crew, the boys that don't like to be called rustlers?"

Loop Deshler cursed heartily. "They're through, the snake-bellied, double-deckin' sons," he grated. "If any of 'em show up again, you got your orders to measure 'em for a six-by-three bed."

Crile smiled coldly. "I'll keep a couple because they know the range. I'll let the others go. They might give us a little help if they should happen to cut Smiler Britt's trail. I've heard of Britt. He's bronc. If he throws in with the Pee Wee Pool we'll need all the help we can get. So you think Britt called the turn on the cow-stealin' end of this ball of yarn, eh?"

Loop Deshler eyed his hired killer, a slow, uneasy stir beginning in his mind. He had been hit hard by Smiler's revelation. Deshler prided himself on his craft and shrewdness, and the discovery that his own riders had been double-crossing him and laughing at him, did not set so well. And now he was taking on more dangerous playmates. Trig Orsatti had been cunning, crafty, treacherous. What would a man like Pony Crile assay in the final retort?

"What I think is my own business, Crile," the stubborn rancher growled. "Britt didn't fill the bill. Too soft. Rustlin'. Bah! I kin snag rustlers myself, old as I am. I wanted a fightin' man. Britt will be on the Pee Wee side of the smoke, mark my word."

"We'll deal him out in a hurry if he does," Crile said lazily. "Now about this Dave Murdock. Britt said somethin' about a boy. Is Murdock a married man?"

"Murdock's wife is dead, but he's got two brats. Boy about twelve, thirteen. A dirty-faced girl, maybe twenty-one-two that wears man's pants all the time. But they don't figure in this. We don't fight women and kids. I got a gal of my own to think about, Crile. Don't forget that. She's all I got. I'd rather lose the ranch than have anything happen to her."

Crile's face remained bleak. "You spoke awhile ago about having a spy in the Pee Wee Pool. Are you sure of him?"

"Sh-uh," Deshler breathed. "Fer Gawd's sake, don't speak that above a whisper. Dave Murdock would spread-eagle him over a slow fire if he got hep. Yeah, his name is Hunk Sisk. He runs a few scrubs an' ringhorns in his iron, way up the valley. Rides with the Pee Wee blisters—but takes orders from me. He's safe. I got some deadwood on him. He'll be here late tomorrow night to report about the Pool meetin'."

"What meeting?"

"I forgot. Sisk sent word this afternoon that the Pool was havin' a palaver at Ike Walters' place up the valley at sundown tomorrow. Ways an' means committee tuh welcome you will be named, Pony, I reckon. The whole valley knows you've come in, yuh know."

Crile knocked ash from his cigar. "All the members will be at the powwow, I take it."

"Yeah. Every fightin' man. Sa-ay,

Pony, there's your chance. You can jump 'em there, an' start the ball rollin'."

Crile smiled without mirth. "Jump a dozen fighting men, eh? I've got a better plan. What if we moved over to Dave Murdock's spread about sundown and burned it down—just as a hint that we mean business? Also we could finish off his remuda. Horses are worth their weight in greenbacks sometimes in a range war."

Deshler frowned. "I was figurin' on usin' them buildin's as a second camp when I took over."

"You can build new ones. Maybe Murdock and his riders will come whoopin' down to stop the fire. It's always good shootin' when you've got your target against a blaze."

Deshler looked pleased. "Now that's an idea. But remember about the girl and the kid. Give them time to get clear."

CHAPTER THREE

Smiler Comes Back!

SMILER had breakfasted on a belt notch, and was side-hilling the Bluestones toward a funnel notch that would open up the trail southward. Come nightfall he would be hitting some ranch in the south slope where every stranger was not an enemy, and find some grub.

Cascade Center, the sod and frame metropolis, was abeam, the scattered, two-score buildings toylike at this ten-mile distance through crystal air. Smiler saw a knot of riders heading for town up the Ten of Hearts trail. Smiler's binoculars drew them near.

"Four of Orsatti's rustlin' rannies," he grinned. "Luggin' their blankets an' ridin' private horses. Looks like Loop Deshler did take some stock in what I told him about bein' played both ways by his punchers. I reckon Pony Crile gave 'em their clearance papers. But some of them are missin'. 'Pache Ventrigger for one. I reckon they've joined up with Crile."

He rode on. Dave Murdock's Rolling M spread hove sharper into view five miles beyond town. Its log house and the ragged corral rings were sharp and distinct, for the valley was narrowing.

Now and then heavy-chested steers broke brush. Most of them wore the Rolling M. This was rich grazing country up here, with every ravine carrying water.

Smiler mused on the jest of circumstances that was prodding Loop Deshler into fertilizing this smiling range with the blood of good, fighting men. In the past the railroad had cut along the base of this range to the east, passing the mouth of Cascade Valley. It gave the Ten of Hearts only a day's drive to the shipping pens. And Deshler had wired off the upper valley ranchers from his range, forcing them to drive the other way through the pass and to the railroad nearly two hundred miles to the south.

Then the railroad had tunneled and cut a new right of way through the Bluestones farther west, shortening their route by fifty miles, and leaving Deshler high and dry with the whiphand gone to the upper valley. They were fire-eating old-timers too, and they had warped it to Deshler as he had warped it to them.

Brush crackled across a steep-banked ravine that Smiler was skirting. A snorting steer with many rings on its scarred horns ploughed the alder. Smiler caught a glimpse of a bobbing hat in its wake, and a boy's excited, freckled face.

The Murdock kid again. His loop was singing, and in the air before Smiler could whoop a warning. It was a catch too. And the fool kid was tied down hard and fast to that snorter—and on a down-hill pull. The kid's pony sat down pretty on the rope.

"Two of a kind, a fool hawss an' a rat-

tle-brained button," was the thought in Smiler's mind.

Crash! The steer was busted well enough. But it rolled over the lip of the ravine. The pony was capsized by the jar. With a pop, the cinches parted. The kid was literally exploded a dozen feet through the air, riding his hull with fenders spread like wings.

He went into the ravine too with a screech of fright. He tobogganed twenty feet down a cutbank on his belly, then brought up with a smash against a boulder.

The steer came ahoof, red-eyed. The kid was only a dozen yards away, and reeling shakily to his feet. He was fish-mouthed, the breath slammed entirely out of him. The steer bogged its head, and began picking up momentum in his direction.

Smiler had hit the ground, and was descending the opposite bank, riding ten feet at a leap on sliding heels. But he saw that he could never get there in time to bulldog that beef.

His brace of forty-fives slapped into his palms, and he poured lead into the steer as fast he could crowd it from the muzzles.

Round holes spouted in red hide. The steer was dead on its feet when it reached the dazed boy—but it reached him, brute instinct carrying it on. The lad made a stunned, weak attempt to duck. But a horn hooked a leg. He went sailing over the steer's back into a thicket. His head struck a tree, and he lay still. The steer crumpled like a falling brick wall.

A pulsing tide of crimson was spurting from the unconscious boy's right thigh when Smiler crashed panting to his side.

"Got an artery," Smiler gritted. Smiler had a tourniquet on the leg in less than a feverish minute. Even so there was too big a puddle of turgid crimson under foot before the throbbing flow ceased.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Lid's Off!

AN HOUR later Smiler rode up to the Rolling M, the boy's limp form in his arms. He swore when only one figure broke from the squat, log ranch-house to come running fearfully. It was Ruth Murdock, the daughter. Loop Deshler's description of her had been far wide of the mark. She was not "dirty-faced." She did carry a good, healthy coat of tan on her round cheeks, and on her competent arms. And she wore jeans too, and boots that were stirrup polished and spur creased.

"Mercy," she gasped, her face draining of color. "Buddie!"

"Where are the men-folks?" Smiler demanded. He swung down so easily that his burden was not jarred.

"They're—they're gone." She was shaking. "Oh, Buddie! Is he—is he—"

"Naw," Smiler said loudly, as he strode to the house. "He's just a tough, old buckaroo that tied down to more than he could handle. Steer played tag with him. He's lost some gore, an' got a knot on his head. But he'll be up an' at 'em before long."

But Smiler was not so sure in spite of his outward confidence. The kid's face had taken on a bluish cast that made Smiler's heart ache. Buddie Murdock was in the shadow.

"I'll fan the wind for a doctor," Smiler said after he had laid his burden on a couch in the dining-room.

For the first time she really realized who he was. The sudden change in her brown eyes stung him. Her body stiffened. So did Smiler's. He looked at her with grave, gray eyes, challenging her.

"I'll ride for the doctor," she said hoarsely. "We—we don't need any help from *you*."

"You're needed here, if he comes around," Smiler said with flat finality. "I'm on my way."

That halted her. But Smiler headed down the trail with a wry grimace of pain replacing his habitual humorous quirk. He had known no friends in Cascade Valley when he came in. He would have none when he left—but he had made enemies.

"I hired out to Loop Deshler, an' that makes me a wolf," he reflected. "Well, maybe I am, but I'm a lobo."

His palomino was carrying foam when it reached Cascade Center. Smiler recognized some of the horses at the rack in front of the Senate Bar. His face tightened. He had forgotten that the rustling cowhands were in town, liquidating their troubles.

Mex Gonzales' swart, frog-mouthed face framed itself in the cool shadow of the saloon door. Gonzales wore a bandage around his thick skull. He retreated hastily. Smiler heard his growl of warning. There was a rush of movement within. Then they came swarming out, four strong, carrying fire-water bravery.

But Smiler had alighted in the interval, and was standing at the end of the porch, only his shoulders exposed, grinning coolly at them over the sights of his guns.

"I'd like to accommodate you boys," he smiled. "But I got other business. Shuck 'em. One at a time, startin' with you, Mex. You're flanked."

They read the set of Smiler's face correctly, and their arms began to rise. Roaring death lay beneath that smile and they knew it. Gonzales shed his gunbelt with extreme care. One by one the others complied. Weighted holsters were lowered carefully to the planks.

"Now wheel and move inside," Smiler ordered.

"You won't last long," one predicted. "There's other guns in the valley rigged for yuh."

"Meanin' Pony Crile and his gun riders, I take it," Smiler grinned. "So Loop Deshler has checked me on his tally-book too. Let 'em come. It's gettin' to be quite a party."

He prodded them inside, and gathered up their hardware. "You'll find your field-pieces in the horse trough," he called.

Smiler found Doc Hannibal playing checkers with Heavythumb Martin, the town grocer.

"Buddie Murdock, hey?" the doctor rumbled, elevating his minus three hundred pounds. "Lost a lot of corpuscles, huh? It's my move when I get back, Heavy. Don't you spill this board like you did last time I was called away. I got you licked."

The doctor had a buckboard sprung out to ten feet, which served to cushion the trails for his aging frame.

"I'm stayin' awhile," Smiler said as he hooked up the doctor's team of rat-eared buckskins. "I'll slope along later."

"You're goin' with me right now," Doc Hannibal grumbled. "I saw that play down in front o' the Senate."

"I run from those slicks last night," Smiler said. "I'm takin' root from now on when I'm crowded."

"I might need a man with some red blood in his pipes," the doctor snorted, picking up the reins. "Come on, Britt. Giddap. The kid is young. Growin' like a weed. He might need a boost. I'll have to tap yuh. There's nobody else available."

"I DON'T recollect tellin' yuh that the girl was alone at the ranch," Smiler said as he caught up with the buckboard which already was reeling along the trail outside of town.

"Didn't need to. I know Dave an' his riders ain't home. An' drat it, some of 'em never will come home."

"I savvy," Smiler said grimly. "The Pee Wee Pool is holdin' a war dance tuhday. Don't blame 'em."

"Yuh didn't think an old rango like Dave Murdock would set around pickin' his teeth while Loop Deshler filled the range full of trigger-tossers, did yuh? There's been three killin's already. The bodies was brought in before daylight. Monk Bremer, Blackie Drake an' Trig Orsatti has cashed."

"Yeah, I knew about that."

"I reckoned you might have some dim recollection of it."

Not long after they swept into the Rolling M ranchyard.

"Oh, Buddie is—is—I'm afraid he's dying," the girl sobbed, racing from the house. Her face was gray with helpless fear and grief.

Doc Hannibal's arrival in the room seemed to flood the place with vitality. He worked for fifteen minutes on the wan, still boy. Buddie Murdock had gone farther down the long trail.

"Another basin of hot water, Ruthie," the doctor ordered, standing erect. "Boilin' hot."

Then he turned to Smiler. "Roll up your sleeves. Set here by the bed. This won't hurt."

Ruth Murdock entered with the water, and paused, staring from the busy doctor to Smiler and back again. The doctor had spread out an apparatus of tubes, syringes and needles. He was swabbing Smiler's arm with cotton, daubed in some reeking preparation.

"You're not—not *him!*" she cried. "Not him! I'll do it, Doctor!"

"The only thing I ever had against you Murdocks is your damned, stubborn pride!" the doctor snorted. "Keep your hair on, Ruth. Buddie needs a pint or so of soup in his tubes. This long-legged, ugly-lookin' lout might as well be makin' some good use of what he's got before the rest is spilled all over the valley."

"I won't stand for it. I won't."

"There's nothing wrong with it," Smiler snapped. "It's fightin' blood."

"Killer's blood," she flamed chokingly. "You and Pony Crile. Paid to drive us out of the valley—to kill us off. You'll never live to spend your filthy murder money, Smiler Britt. You're on the black list. You'll be shot the minute—" And she broke off, realizing she had said too much.

She did not understand Smiler's harsh, mirthless laugh. So the Pee Wee had booked him too. Smiler was being booked all along the line, it seemed. Well, let 'em come. One more bunch of death-dealers wouldn't make any difference. No one had bothered to ask him where he really stood in this mess of misery that was on the boil, and damned if he'd tell them. Except with whistling lead, if they wanted it that way.

The doctor was working with hands deft and sure despite their apparent clumsiness. "All set," he said to Smiler. "It'll take maybe five minutes."

Smiler stared moodily out the nearby window. Suddenly his gaze pinched and focused. He stirred slightly, then eased back. The tight grin returned to his lips. He glanced at the doctor's watch on the bed. He still had three minutes to wait —three minutes to live, perhaps.

Men were drifting up from the creek bottom. They came afoot, hugging the brush, and the barn wall, crouching low as they ran for the ranch-house. They were loaded down with guns and ammunition. Smiler identified Dave Murdock and others in the Pee Wee Pool. These were the men who had booked him to die.

DAVE MURDOCK was first to enter. He went dead in his tracks when he saw Smiler, his shaggy gray brows

pinching together, his eagle-bright eyes taking on a wilder gleam. His daughter ran to him with a cry of relief. She sobbed explanations. Other silent, hostile-faced men crowded in, packing the place with silent animosity.

"I'd rather Buddie had died," Dave Murdock finally spat, his face like stone.

Hannibal snorted contemptuously as he deftly removed his apparatus and cared for the punctures. "Mule-headed," he rumbled. "What are you sooners sneakin' around so durned mysterious about?"

Murdock answered, but it was Smiler he addressed. "Pony Crile is on his way here," he said. "I reckon that's no news to Britt. But Crile thinks we're still up at Ike Walters' place. We wanted him tuh think so. We know Crile's system. He's a dry-gulcher an' a ranch-burner. I reckon he aims on havin' a bonfire here. He'll find that this place is plenty hot."

Doc Hannibal was startled. "Not on your tintype," he protested. "A shoot-out won't help Buddie. He needs quiet."

Murdock's face was a study as he looked at his son. Buddie already was losing his bluish pallor. Strength was returning to him.

"Kin he travel?" his father asked.

Hannibal rubbed his chin. "Reckon so. He's over the hill. But have we got time?"

"Crile is still a mile away. We've been watchin' the Ten of Hearts since noon, an' come driftin' back in a hurry when we saw 'em start. You've got time. Pack some duds, Ruth. Yo're goin' tuh town with doc an' Buddie."

She did not protest, but she was trembling as she threw together some apparel. She knew what was coming. Death would be holding carnival here soon. In a minute or two she was ready. Buddie had already been placed on a mattress in the doctor's buckboard.

Smiler had moved apart from the others, weighed down by their silent hatred. Dave Murdock came back in the house as the buckboard rattled away. "Sam, you an' Bucksaw an' Willie take the bunkhouse," he ordered tersely. "Nevada an' Hutch in the barn. Don't crack down until I give the yell. Try to make a clean-up at the first throw. It's the only way. No mercy. Gut-shoot 'em."

He looked at Smiler. "I'll have your guns, Britt."

"I'd feel naked," Smiler said briefly. "I'll keep 'em—as long as I can."

Murdock's rugged brow grew more furrowed. "My daughter asked a favor o' me—on account of Buddie," he growled. "That's why yuh're still alive. Tonight the trails will still be open for yuh. But not after sun-up tomorrow."

"A while ago I promised myself that I'd never run from anybody in Cascade Valley again," Smiler gritted. "I keep my cutters."

"Fella, we mean business. Out there in the bottoms hangs one double-crossin' snake. Hunk Sisk. He's been ridin' with us, an' takin' pay from Loop Deshler. We had him tabbed days ago, but we give him the rope that hung him. The only difference is that you worked for Deshler in the open. We know yuh, Britt. You was a killer in Texas an' that breed don't shed their odor. You came here to do your specialty, but the goin' looked uphill, so you had help brought in. Pony Crile an' his bullet crew are goin' to walk right into our guns in a few minutes. After that you'll be all alone again. What chance have yuh got?"

"The same as I had this mornin'," Smiler snapped.

"Sh-uh," someone cautioned. "Here they come. Jest sighted 'em crossin' the sandbar below the hayfield."

Murdock stared moodily at Smiler. "Yuh got me hooked," he admitted. "The

doc allows you saved Buddie's life. Where do yuh stand in this shoot-out?"

"Neutral. Neutral as hell."

"See that yuh don't back-track on that promise."

Smiler moved to a corner where he would be out of the way. He found himself taut as wire. Dead silence held the Rolling M. Outside peaceful dusk was gathering. Inside men were crouching, their fingers crooked on triggers. The lid was off in Cascade Valley.

CHAPTER FIVE

Smiler Rides Alone

PONY CRILE and 'Pache Ventrigger had left the others, and mounted a little hog-back on the flank of the Bluestones to survey the Rolling M, which was a short mile away. Crile now wore a black coat over his white shirt, but his guns were low and free.

The sun had just been swallowed by the rims. Crile saw a buckboard leaving the ranch. He swung his glasses on it, then gave them to Ventrigger who had been in Cascade Valley for a dozen years.

"Doc Hannibal, an' the Murdock girl," Ventrigger said. "An' looks like somebody blanketed in the bottom. Hurt, I reckon, an' bein' taken to town."

Crile turned the glasses on the ranch. Its windows stared back, blank and lifeless. So they returned to the dozen men below.

"A push-over," Crile said briefly. "Even the girl's gone. That makes it easier. Let's move."

He led them at a lope through the willows, and across a sandbar where they waded the creek. With drumming hooves they swept into the silent ranch-yard.

"Get the barn an' house goin', Sandblast. Mig, you touch off the bunkhouse. We'll take care of the cavvy."

They wheeled, drawing their six-shooters to head for the proposed slaughter at the corral, where thirty horses milled.

Abruptly Pony Crile threw himself aside in the saddle. Perhaps reptilian instinct had warned him, perhaps he had heard a bolt click, or caught the glint of a gun-barrel being pushed over a window-sill. But it saved his life.

"Go!" a harsh voice shouted.

Cr—ash! A lightning-sheet of red death blasted the ranks of the mounted men. The bunkhouse, barn and main building erupted belching gun-flame from every doorway and window.

A bullet bit Crile's saddle horn, knocked sparks from the steel frame and wailed away like a banshee. The air about him was alive with hissing destruction. He heard gurgles, groans, the limp *plop* of falling bodies. Men were toppling from horses all around him—his men. He saw the one he had called Mig reeling, and trying gamely to lift his guns.

Crile's two side guns were chattering madly now as he whirled his horse to run this slaughter trap. The gunman's thin face had gone as chalky as phantom death itself.

The other survivors were wheeling too and running before the leaden storm toward the darkening brush of the creek bottom. Fourteen strong they had been as they rode up from the brush. Eight they numbered as they turned. Two more went down before they made it.

Crile, his teeth bared, his eyes like a tortured demon's, fed steel to his horse for a quarter of a mile before he eased off. He heard others crashing the brush around. He finally brought five of them together.

"Alamo kept goin'," one panted. "Allowed he reckoned that his scalp had got plenty loose lately. He's driftin'."

Crile spat a withering oath. "Good riddance. We were double-decked. That spy of Deshler's built a frame for us. Hunk Sisk, that's his name. When we

get him we'll toast him before we carve him."

"Needn't bother," 'Pache Ventrigger informed him. "Back there a ways, I bumped into Hunk. He had done a fling in the breeze at the end of a rope. I reckon he played square with us, but the Pee Wee rangatangs got smart to him."

"We'll pull this thing out of the fire yet," Crile frothed. "Dry-gulch us, will they! I'll show 'em I've just started to roll the hoop. From now on everything goes."

"What's your program?" someone asked doubtfully.

"Murdock's girl is on the road to town," Crile snapped. "We may head her before she reaches it, if we ramble. Ride! We'll have Murdock hunkered before daybreak."

"YUH better ride now," Dave Murdock said to Smiler.

The living-room of the ranch was acrid with powder fumes. Outside men were shouting, and a few excited ones still pumped lead into the creek bottom.

Smiler shrugged and moved his long legs toward open air. He did not feel so good in his stomach. The scene outside did not brace him any. The Pee Wee men were blood-mad. Three of the scattered, huddled forms on the ground still breathed. The ranchers already had hemp around their necks and were dragging them to an oak beyond the barn. This was war.

"Don't tarry none, fella," a burly cowman snarled at Smiler. "Only for Dave we'd add you to the party. Don't let sun-up ketch you between these rims."

Smiler mounted, and did not look back. Darkness cut off the scene behind him, for which he was glad.

Dave Murdock stood for a moment staring thoughtfully after his tall figure, wondering if after all he had not made a mistake. But Smiler had a rep as a killer, hadn't he? And he had taken Loop Deshler's money, hadn't he? Better that he leave the Cascade, no matter which way the cards lay. . . .

Smiler was within a half mile of town when he saw the buckboard, dim against some alder brush alongside the trail. The buckskins were still in harness, and tethered.

Smiler nearly fell over Doc Hannibal's bulky form in the grass as he swung down. The doctor was breathing, but dazed. A two-inch welt on his forehead was puffy and discolored.

"Buffaloed with a gun barrel," Smiler gritted.

He raced to the wagon. Buddie Murdock was still there, and a flaring match showed him to be breathing deeply. Evidently he was asleep, the crisis past.

"Ruth—Miss Murdock!" Smiler called hoarsely, striding around the wagon and peering in the grass.

There was no answer. Then he saw a scrap of paper projecting from the whip socket. It was an illy scrawled note:

> MURDOCK:
> Keep your mouth shut. We'll make an offer for your outfit within twenty-four hours. Be ready to take it.

It was unsigned. Signature was unnecessary. Smiler's forehead grew cold and damp. This was what came of bringing wolves into the valley.

He went back to the doctor. Hannibal was stirring and moaning. There was water in a gully nearby, and Smiler, within fifteen minutes, had the big doctor talking lucidly. He had been jumped by riders who had poled him before he could resist.

"So they kidnaped Ruth!" Hannibal groaned. "Dang me for a fool. I drove slow because of Buddie. Might have knowed that skunks like Pony Crile wouldn't draw the line at anythin'."

SMILER helped him erect. "Can you drive?" he demanded. "You can. Take the boy into town, and then send someone with a slow tongue to carry the news to her father. Tell Murdock to lay low. It's the girl's only hope. Crile won't shy at murdering her if he's crowded. I'm ridin'."

"Where?"

"On Crile's trail. Where did yuh suppose?"

"But—but—"

"One man might be able to do something on the quiet. I'll try."

Hannibal wagged a soul-weary head. "I reckon yo're right. Power to yuh, boy. Ruthie Murdock is a mighty fine gal."

Smiler pointed the palomino's nose southward—toward Ten of Hearts territory. The horse had been over considerable trail already, but it still had plenty of bottom left. It hammered out the miles of dark rangeland nobly. Smiler jerked staples to pass the Rolling M south line fence, and then raced down the sweeping benches under the stars toward Loop Deshler's spread.

Light glowed in the Ten of Hearts main building. It grew from a dot to a tiny square. Smiler left his horse in a willow flat half a mile away, and went forward on foot, doing the last quarter of the distance on hands and knees.

The stars told him it was now well past midnight. Once he thought he heard the distant drum of hooves. But they died away before he could make sure. He had no hope that Ruth Murdock would have been brought to the Ten of Hearts. But he did anticipate that Pony Crile would show up here sooner or later. Crile's trail would lead to her. Of that he was sure.

But Smiler was astounded to discover them. One was Crile.

that he apparently had overrated Pony Crile's intelligence. There was a white-stockinged roan drooping at the rack—Crile's horse. And as Smiler came creeping up into the shadow of the bunkhouse, a burdened man came out. He carried a form, swaddled from head to foot in a gay bed-quilt.

Smiler went taut and drew his guns. There was no doubt but that it was a girl he was carrying.

Then he relaxed with a silent groan, and steeled himself to wait.

There was a hundred yards of bare ranch-yard between him and Crile. Smiler realized he never could hope to cross it without being seen by the gunman. And Crile had the girl to use as a shield and silence Smiler's thunder.

He would have to play for a better break, for the girl's sake. It was tough, but the only way.

Crile had lifted the girl astride and was mounting and passing a rope around both their bodies. Then he rode away, passing around the ranch-house.

Smiler had no choice. He must follow now, at once and afoot. There were horses in the corral, but a horse would only betray pursuit.

"Crile's cayuse is carryin' double, an' already fagged," he mumbled, as he ripped off boots whose high-heels would be only a handicap. "I'll stay with him as long as I can."

And he set out, running in his socks, on the trail of the gray wolf who was heading for some den in the Bluestones.

LOOP DESHLER had waited nervous hours since Crile had headed his troop of gun raiders northward before sundown.

It was midnight when he heard horses. Deshler rushed outside, and then paused, a chill numbing his body. Only three of

Crile dismounted in silence and came into the living-room alone with the owner, leaving 'Pache Ventrigger and Sandblast Nevers outside on guard.

Loop Deshler remained still and appalled, sensing the disaster. Crile pulled a stiff drink from a bottle on the table.

"Wh—where's th' others?" Deshler finally asked reluctantly.

Crile laughed gratingly. "Most of 'em are in hell," he said. "The Pee Wee outfit got eight of us. You sent us into a deadfall, Deshler."

"I swear to Gawd—" Deshler began shakily. But Crile cut him off.

"That's past an' downstream. Everybody's got to cash sometime, but I'm still alive and afloat. I've got Dave Murdock called. You'll own the Rolling M before sundown tomorrow, Deshler—if you've got any guts. Have you?"

Deshler braced himself. "I don't savvy."

Crile did not waste words. "I've got Murdock's girl. I left a hint that her father would get her back after you had a deed to his Rolling M."

Loop Deshler stared, his eyes bugging. "What? You didn't— But I told yuh—! Kidnapin'! I won't go for it, Crile."

Crile lifted thin eyebrows, his cold eyes beading on the shaken old rancher. "You're dealt in, whether you like it or not," he said with steely finality.

"But, a girl—women—I don't war on women," Deshler cried hoarsely. "Yo're a damned snake, Crile!"

"Put a hitch on your tongue," Crile warned silkily. "You can't fizz out on me now. Murdock will cave. We've got him beat. He'll hand you a deed to his ranch tomorrow. You better give him something to make it look good in court. A couple thousand. I'll take ten thousand for my cut of what you save. You're sliding by penny cheap at that."

Loop Deshler sat down weakly, and did not answer for a long time. He had gone haggard. "All right," he finally said. His voice was hollow and weary.

Crile gave him a contemptuous glance, then headed for the door. "I'll be back around noon," he said. "We've got the girl under cover. They can't find her."

Deshler heard them ride away. After a moment he arose tiredly. He went out, hurried to the corral and saddled a black horse.

"I don't fight women," he muttered hoarsely. "They kin kill me if they want, but I'm goin' to tell Dave Murdock that I ain't stringin' with kidnapers. Gawd, why did I ever bring Pony Crile intuh this valley? The snake. . . ."

But Crile and his two saddle-mates had not gone far. Crile had called a halt among the cottonwoods not far beyond the wagon-shed. "Let's wait a minute," he whispered. "Deshler has caved in. Gone soft. He's goin' to sell us out. I read it in his slippery eyes. Ah, I called it, didn't I? Here he comes to top off. He'll be heading for the Rolling M, the yellow-livered rat! 'Pache, you and Sandblast tail him. Turn him back after he gets out a mile or so. Bring him back to the ranch."

"What'll you be doin'?" Sandblast asked suspiciously.

"Deshler is double-crossing us," Crile rasped. "He's shoving us out on a limb. We'll never get a cent out of that old vinegaroon unless we put on the pressure. We've kidnaped one girl tonight. They can't hang us any higher if we go double. We'll get real, heavy money for this second one. I'm going for it. After you bring Deshler back, leave him here, and meet me at the canyon fork."

"Jee—upiter, you mean to snag ontuh Deshler's girl too?" Sandblast gasped. "What good will that do us?"

"About twenty-five thousand dollars' worth," Crile rasped. "Deshler will think the Pee Wee Pool grabbed her to square things. We'll put a heavy price on her. Deshler can pay it."

They parted, Ventrigger and Nevers circling away to intercept the rancher, who was now on his way. Crile waited

a few minutes, then rode calmly back to the ranch-house.

He wasted no time. He entered, drew his neckerchief to his eyes, backed away and ripped the lock from the door of Lola Deshler's room. Her first scream was smothered by his hand. She did not even see her assailant in the darkness. Then the bedclothes were pulled over her head. Crile had his lariat, and he wound her until she was helpless, and limp. She had fainted.

He carried her out, tied her to him on the horse, and headed for the hills.

And behind him came Smiler Britt.

CHAPTER SIX

Lobo Showdown

CRILE was forced to hold his horse down to little more than a fast walk, and Smiler had little trouble staying within earshot.

Soon Crile headed up a talus slope and struck a deep, narrow canyon in the flank of the Bluestones. The going was even slower here. Smiler got a chance to ease his laboring lungs. Foot-work was not in his line. Thorns and rocks were torturing him, but he went on stoically.

The canyon forked after a mile. There Crile halted. Smiler thought his chance had come. But he heard the ring of hooves down the canyon, and was forced to belly down again. Two riders passed him. He identified one as Ventrigger.

The pursuit began again. Smiler's feet were torn, and leaving a red trail. The three ahead pushed up the right fork for two miles or more. Then the clatter of clawing hooves on rocks ceased. Smiler was below a curve in the canyon, which had narrowed to a mere ravine. He rounded the shoulder in time to see them carrying the girl into a dugout in a claybank. An oil lamp was burning in the place, and he caught the fragrance of frying flich.

The opposite wall was soaring rock with an overhang at the base. In the gloom there he could hear the stamp of horses. Ventrigger was leading the three saddled animals beneath it too.

He knew now that he had more than three to face—five perhaps. He decided to jump them. He had played for a break, and it had never come. He would have to make his own breaks.

Ventrigger was stripping the three horses. That was one he could eliminate without much trouble. Smiler stripped off one of his heavy socks. Its sole was shredded, but the leg of it made a good sling into which he knotted a round rock as big as a fist.

He worked to the shadow of a boulder ten feet from the door of the dugout. He could hear the heavy rumble of voices within. Then Ventrigger came picking his way over the rocky bottom toward the dugout.

Smiler rose behind him. The improvised blackjack crashed on the rustler's peaked hat, and Ventrigger, with a low groan, sagged back into Smiler's arms. Smiler lowered him, and drew his guns.

He paused at the door, which was a rude panel hung on strips of leather. Then he shoved it, and stepped in. He had time for one fleeting glance around. The place was not large, possibly ten by twelve. A warped cookstove was its only furnishing.

Two blindfolded girls sat against the left wall, bound hand and foot. One was swaddled in blankets, only her blonde hair and bare feet protruding. She was weeping. Smiler's startled eyes leaped to the other. Brown-haired, composed of chin. Ruth Murdock.

One of the four men was watching the door as he entered. The other three had not looked up, supposing that it was Ventrigger.

"Up with 'em!" Smiler barked.

BUT the startled gunman already was going for his cutter. Smile shot him before he could break it into the clear.

Pony Crile came around, his guns already streaking flame. Taken totally by surprise, Crile lived up to his reputation. He was speed personified, deadly as forked lightning.

Smiler realized that Sandblast Nevers was drawing too. The fourth ruffian was out of the play. This one had been cooking, and had shed his guns which hung across the shack. But it was Crile who was thundering ahead of Sandblast.

Smiler tripped both triggers at Crile almost before the first gunman's body thudded to the floor. Both of Crile's sixes were spouting. Smiler felt a leg ripped from beneath him by a slug, and he was falling. But he sent another twin blast of death as he toppled. All of his four bullets had found Crile. These last two crashed through the killer's breast, and he went back over the stove.

Smiler sprawled on the floor. But it was a lucky fall for him. Nevers' first bullets splintered the door against which Smiler had been framed an instant before. Smiler fired again. The slug whirled Sandblast off balance. But he steadied and chopped down again. It was point-blank range. Smiler blasted the third of his opponents into eternity with two smashing bullets.

Smiler swung his .45's on the fourth outlaw, who was crouching down, gray-lipped and paralyzed. But the realization that his opponent was unarmed cut the battle madness that had engulfed Smiler. He stayed his trigger-fingers.

He arose and hobbled to Ruth Murdock, cutting her free with a knife that had been used to strip the bacon. She blinked up at him, terror in her eyes. It slowly died, and he realized that wild joy and relief was replacing her fear.

"You—you—" she breathed.

Smiler felt sudden, surging strength in his body in spite of his numbing wound. "So you don't think I'm so bad after all?" he asked hoarsely. "Me, Smiler Britt, the killer?"

"Not after what you did for Buddie," she said. "Oh, you're hurt."

"Not bad." He smiled.

* * *

Old Loop Deshler, haggard as grisly death, came racing back from Cascade Center shortly after sun-up. He had twenty-five thousand in gold in his saddle. He had routed out the town banker early. With dull eyes he looked at the man who awaited him on the porch. All the fight was gone from Deshler.

"She's inside, Loop," Smiler said arising. "Your twenty-five thousand is safe. You needn't turn it over to Crile. He's dead. So are all his crew, but two. And they'll swing."

"She's—she's—safe?" Deshler faltered.

"Safe, but not resigned to livin' in Cascade Valley any longer," Smiler grinned. "So I reckon it'll be up to you to sell out, Loop. I reckon the Pee Wee Pool can swing enough money to take over the Ten of Hearts."

Deshler stared in. Ruth Murdock was holding smelling salts for his tearful, nerve-shaken daughter. He looked at Smiler Britt's eyes that were steely above his smile.

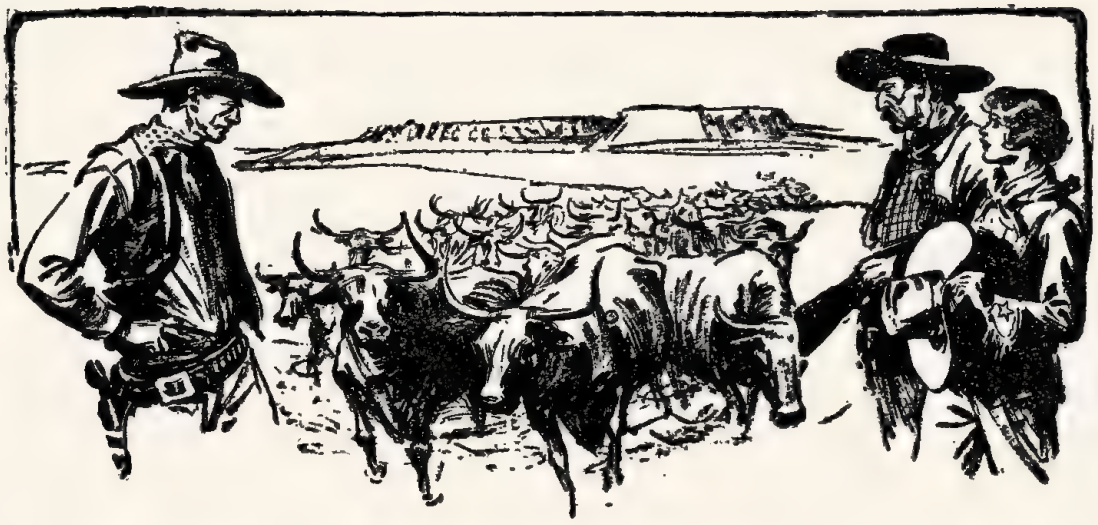
"I reckon I'll sell," Deshler croaked.

Smiler and Ruth headed up the benches toward the Rolling M. "Your dad gave me until sun-up to shuck the valley," Smiler mused. "I'm hours past the deadline."

"Just let him even think of carrying on that foolish feud any longer," she blazed. "I'll have something to say about that. You're here to stay—er, that is—as long as you want to."

Smiler smiled contentedly. He knew that he was in Cascade Valley for a long, long time.

THE END



UP THE TRAIL

TOM DALLAS had taken human life just once too often—and his conscience bothered him. No man to seek trouble was Tom, no killer seeking blood and glory. Just an ordinary, likeable sort of chap who'd been cursed with the natural art of six-gun mastery and the sort of spunky disposition which wouldn't let him back down from any given situation. A combination, that, which leads all too often to gun-argument and Boothill burial—for the other man.

And Tom didn't like the prospect of going on killing men who, comparative strangers, might on closer acquaintance, prove to be pretty decent sort of fellows. Tom did what seemed to him the obvious, honorable thing. He took the shells from the Colt his father had given him and vowed that for one year he'd never reload the old gun. And it didn't matter a bit to him that at that particular moment the outraged brother of one of his victims, a man with quite a killing record of his own, was hot on his trail with hungry sixes. Tom figured that their meeting, when it came, would present the sort of test he wanted to make. Sick of blood and slaughter, he figured that if he couldn't prolong his life except through further gun slaughter he might just as well go join his own victims in Boothill!

That, in brief, is the opening situation of Max Brand's next great novel, "Gunless Gunman," which is scheduled for the next issue of STAR WESTERN. Tom Dallas, courageous to a fault, scrupulously honest with himself and the rest of mankind, yet easy-going, sympathetic, spontaneous and lovable, is exactly the sort of man's man character which an author of Max Brand's skill and human understanding can bring so realistically to life.

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I have a wonderful opportunity for women on local Tea and Coffee Routes. Earnings run up to $5.00 a day just in spare time. The work is light and pleasant and the profits exceptionally big. Housewives, school teachers, office workers, factory workers—all find my new and novel plans for spare-time work highly profitable. If you have other work to do just start in spare time. Mrs. C. R. Luoma, W. Va., averaged $40.00 a week for a year on one of these routes. Mrs. Preston Portwood, Ga., quit a $10.00 a week department store job and cleared $7.50 the first afternoon. These unusual earnings show what big money women can make. I now have an even better plan to offer you. Send me your name today.

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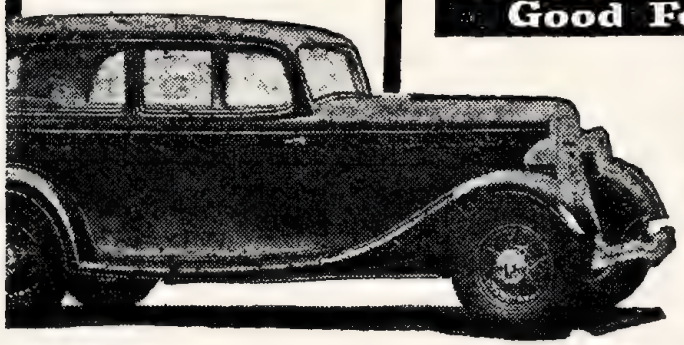

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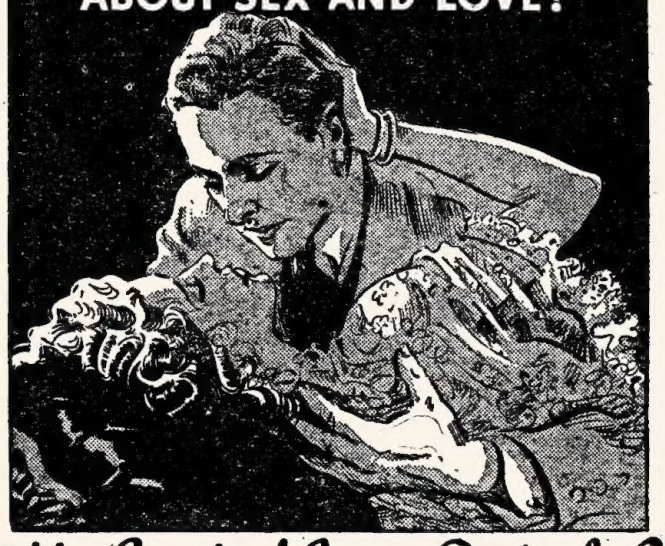

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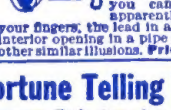

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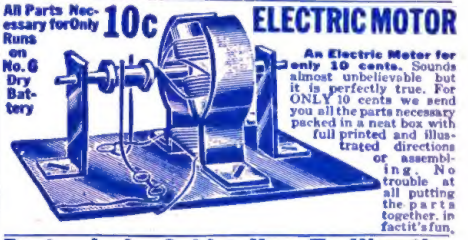

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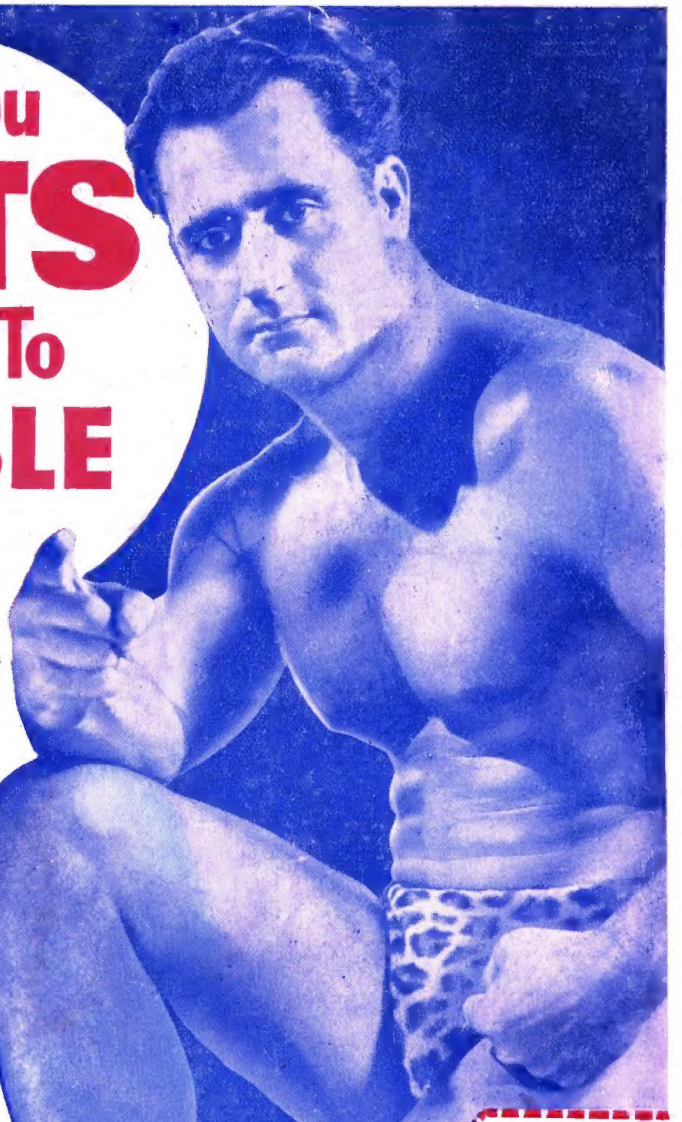

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